

Shadow's Gambit

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Summary: A stranded pilot, two stolen ships, a small conspiracy, and a villan that just won't quit. What else can go wrong?

Shadow's Gambit

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Battlestar Galactica

Shadows Gambit

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Book six

of the

—

Black

Raptor

Series

—

By

Mike Newby

Based on the characters created

By

Glen A. Larson

All things considered, it could have been much worse. That was the first thing to come through the haze in Athena' mind.

Her entire body sagged against the restraints of her ejection seat, swaying gently in the breeze.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and looked about. She hung a good three meters from the floor of the jungle, her ejection chute a tangle of shredded material, mixed in with the thick branches of the tree.

"Backis!" She called out, hearing her voice reverberate through the thick trees.

Her only response was a slight reduction in the noise of the jungle around her, as animals fell silent in fright. Then the cacophony of noises resumed.

"Great," she muttered, pulling her helmet off, and trying to ignore the throbbing in the left side of her head.

The side of her helmets was scuffed and cracked from the impact of something, probably a branch that did not want to give.

She let the helmet fall, watching it bounce on the ground below with a clunk.

Next challenge: getting down.

She looked about, hoping to find a marginal handhold, and spied what she thought she could use. Reaching up, she grasped a thick branch, pulling herself closer to it. With her other hand, she released the harness of her seat.

No one spoke. There was really nothing to say.

Adama stood at the viewport of his office, his silvery hair shining in the starlight. His eyes searched the heavens, almost as if the tragedy would correct itself. Across from him, standing against the small serving table, Lt. Starbuck stood with his eyes cast down and his hands in his pockets, while Apollo, Adama's son, sat in one of the self conforming chairs, his head in his hands, staring blankly at nothing.

The fourth person in the room was Captain Milesar, the leader of the Black Raptor Squadron.

"You're certain?" Adama asked, refusing to turn around and show the tears in his eyes.

"Absolutely," said Milesar. "I read both beacons. One for each ejection module. They punched out before the impact."

"And what are the odds that they survived the landing?" Adama asked.

"Better than fair, Commander," said Milesar, a frown crossing his face. "Excuse me, sir, but you are going to go after them, aren't you?"

"The planet will be within safe range in four days time," Adama said grimly. "At that point we will be in the best position to release a shuttle probe with adequate protection."

Starbuck fidgeted for a few microns.

"Uh, excuse me," he finally said. "I gotta get out of here."

Milesar watched the distraught lieutenant leave. Then he turned his gaze back to the Commander.

"Sir," Milesar said. "The Raptors have more than enough fuel capacity to escort a shuttle there and back again, with room to spare. We could be ready to fly in ten centons, if you give the word?"

"I appreciate the offer, Captain," said Adama. "But with a Base Ship looming in the dark out there, I want the Galactica a bit closer before we commit to anything so risky."

"But sir Â€"" Milesar started. He thought better of pursuing the argument and his mouth snapped shut. Taking a deep breath he let it out slow.

"By your leave, Commander?"

"Of course," Adama said. "Thank you for your report, Captain. Dismissed."

"Sir," Milesar said sharply, and he strode out of the room.

Once the hatch hissed shut behind him, Adama turned and faced his son.

His eyes were wet with barely held tears.

Apollo rose and the two men clasped shoulders.

"She's all right," said Apollo. "I know she is."

"How did we ever come to this?" Adama asked, as if to himself.

The thing about waking up the second time, Athena noted, was that her entire body was filled with a dull aching throb instead of the sharp stinging pain at the side of her skull.

The odor of something burning reached her nostrils and she heard the cheerful crackling of a small fire. Opening her eyes, she saw that she had been moved from the base of the tree that she had obviously fallen out of, and placed comfortably close to the merry flames.

Moving her head up and back, she could see the tiny survival pod from her ship, sitting open, with various different tools hanging in place. Beyond that sat Backis, weaving several long pale green leaves into a specific shape. He paused for a micron, and then placed the contraption on his head. Athena smiled when she saw that he was making a hat for himself.

"You've got to be kidding?" she asked, a smile on her face.

Her voice startled Backis, but his gaze softened as soon as he saw her staring at him.

"Welcome back, boss," he said with a smile. "How'd you sleep?"

Athena didn't answer, feeling a sharp stab in her head as she moved.

"Just take it easy boss," Backis continued. "I already sent a short pulse transmission to the fleet. They know we're alive and waiting."

The systems were defunct, the lighting questionable, and the complement of centurions well below what Shadow was used to. The cobalt robed Cylon walked cautiously through the darkened corridors of his battered Base Ship, occasionally scooting aside to avoid an arcing cable or popping display station.

"Blasted humans," he muttered to himself.

Shadow reached the entrance to his central command chamber, only to find the transparent plasteen doors shattered. He felt the pieces of the material crunch beneath his feet as he moved into the darkened chamber.

Once he had brought his circle of command consoles back on line, Shadow stood, checking the myriad of repairs his ship required.

A short time later, the massive bulk of a golden centurion strode into the chamber.

"By your command," the deep mechanical voice droned.

"Yes, Kadal," Shadow said unenthusiastically.

"We have intercepted a short burst transmission from a nearby planet," Kadal reported. "The message was encrypted using a colonial encryption key."

"Have you deciphered the code?" Shadow asked.

"Affirmative," Kadal droned.

"Show me." Shadow commanded. He followed Kadal down into the depths of the Base Ship.

Once in the tiny room, Kadal ordered the silver centurion stationed there to guard the entrance, while he and Shadow stood over the monitor.

Shadow pressed the appropriate buttons and an image formed on the screen. It showed a lush jungle background. In the center of the monitor was the face of a young, male Colonial Warrior with sandy brown hair and a hint of stubble on his chin.

Shadow keyed the monitor for replay. Through occasional hisses of static, the message ran through.

"Galactica," The Colonial Warrior said. "This isâ€|..ackis of the Blâ€|k â€|.tor squadrâ€| We went extra vehâ€| eached surface in oneâ€|.. Injuries to â€|eport. Will switch trans..dor on every three câ€|..rs until you signal othâ€|!"

The man knelt before the monitor, and then turned his head to look behind him at something.

His eyes came back to the screen. "â€|ake too long to â€|.. here."

The image winked out as the signal was disconnected.

Shadow stared at the blank screen for a micron. Then he turned to his second in command.

"Did the Galactica receive this signal?" he asked.

"Negative," Kadal droned.

"Hmmâ€| " Shadow stepped away from the console and looked forward, staring at nothing as the lights of his neuro-processor flashed wildly.

"Tell me," He resumed. "What is our current status?"

"Repairs continue," Kadal droned. "We have recovered sixty five fighters after the engagement with the Colonial forces."

"We have flight crews available for all of those ships?" Shadow continued.

"Affirmative."

"Where is our nearest re-supply point?" The IL Cylon asked.

"Quadrant alpha four, in the Gamoray system." Kadal replied without hesitation.

"Too far," Shadow said, thinking out loud. "Do we know where the signal originated from?"

"We can track it." Kadal said.

"Do so, and set a course to the signal's point of origin," Shadow commanded. Then he paused. This was going to be a blow to his pride, but he knew it must be done. "And notify Cylon that we are in need of re-supply, as soon as possible."

The golden head turned towards Shadow. "By your command."

Shadow quickly shuffled out of the room. In the base of his neuro net, the seeds of a plan were beginning to germinate.

His hat was done. That was the first thing that Athena noticed when she rolled over. The pale green, woven acroutment lay comfortably over Backis's eyes, blocking out the rays of sunlight, which penetrated the leafy canopy overhead. The entire picture was so comical, that Athena actually laughed out loud.

"Backis, do you have any idea how ridiculous that looks," she said.

Backis calmly reached up and lifted the hat from over his eyes, looking back over at Athena.

"You're just saying that because you can't make one of your own," he said. Then he lowered the hat back into place and heaved a contented sigh.

"How can you be so calm?" asked Athena. She was actually more than a little nervous about being on an alien planet, cut off from everything she knew.

"Would you rather I panic?" asked Backis. He sat up, pushing his "hat" back on his head and staring up at Athena, who had stumbled to her feet and was walking a circle around the tiny clearing.

"Of course not," she answered.

Backis watched her for a micron, and then a knowing smile spread across his face.

"You've never done this before," he said. He already knew the answer.

"Done what?" asked Athena.

"You've never been camping before, have you?" Backis continued.

Athena grimaced. "No. Why? What's the point?"

"Getting out of the city." Said Backis. "Away from technology, noise, crowds, so on and so on."

"I never saw the need," Athena said defensively.

"You mean, no one ever invited you." Backis translated.

"Oh, no," Athena corrected him. "I got invited many times. I just preferred to stay where I could take a hot shower, and sleep in a warm bed every day."

"Oh," said Backis. "So, you're spoiled."

"I am not spoiled!" Athena said fiercely. "Why would you say that?"

> "You don't seem to be worried about your surroundings any more, boss," Backis leaned back, smiling.<p>

Athena stopped, her next fiery remark dying on her lips. He was right. He had gotten her mind on other things, no matter how ridiculous, and taken her fear away.

"That wasn't fair, Backis," she said.

"Nope," Backis agreed. "But it worked."

He looked sidelong at the supply module with its built in transponder.

"I figure we have a weeks worth of food and water in that thing, plus enough juice in the power cell to last a couple of weeks."

"What happens when we run out of food?" asked Athena.

Backis shrugged. "If we end up staying that long, I'm sure I'll find something for us to live off of. Even if it means hunting and fishing."

"What about the Galactica?" Athena asked.

"I'll send another pulse in about half a centar," Backis said. "In the meantime, we just make ourselves as comfortable as we can."

In the distance, they heard a low rumble of thunder.

"Starting with shelter," Backis said, getting to his feet.

"Where are you going?" asked Athena.

"The crash site isn't too far from here," said Backis. "I'm gonna see if there's anything else that we can use during our little vacation."

She drifted through space like a giant shield. The Galactica moving ahead of the two hundred odd ships under its protection, as if the whole were a mismatched school of various fish, swimming through an ocean of blackness.

At the bridge command station, Commander Adama stood in statuesque silence, his eyes focused out the massive viewport, seeing everything and nothing at the same time.

A voice brought him out of his reverie.

"Yes, Colonel?" Adama asked, turning to his second in command.

"Patrols are all in," Tigh repeated. "Nothing to report. Perhaps the Cylons withdrew?"

Adama shook his head. "You know better than that, old friend. They're out there. They may be damaged or short resources, but they're out there. They're like a lupine on a hunt. Once they lock their jaws on the prey, they don't let go until they're dead."

Tigh nodded, his own face playing out the tension that everyone was feeling.

"Permission to speak freely?" Tigh suddenly asked.

Adama was surprised at the question, but nodded.

"Why the hell are we sitting here?" Tigh asked without preamble. "Every pilot on the ship is busting in the bulkheads to get out there and search for Athena and Backis. That includes me! We could send the entire Raptor Squadron as cover â€" "

"No," Adama said calmly, cutting off Tighs entreaty. "I don't trust it. Athena and Backis are good warriors. If they ejected from the ship, with their supply pod, then they have a transponder that is capable of sending short pulse scrambled transmissions. Athena would have done that the micron they got to ground."

"So?" Tigh asked.

"So, why hasn't she?" Adama asked. "Even if the transponder was damaged, it still should be able to send something, even if it's a burst of static. We have had no communication since the crash."

"What are you saying?" Tigh asked.

"Captain Milesar said he witnessed all three chutes deploy. That means Athena, Backis, and the supply pod. I believe they did reach ground. And I believe they sent a message." Adama said.

"But if they sent a mess" Tigh stopped, his eyes locking on Adama.

Adama read his first officer's mind, and nodded. "Exactly, Tigh. Exactly."

The hatch hissed open, and before Apollo could do anything, he was slammed against the chair by his son.

"Hi dad!" Boxy bellowed as he landed. Behind him, Muffit, the mechanical daggit came scooting in at what passed for a run.

"Boxy," Apollo gasped. "You're getting too big to keep doing that to me." He smiled. He lifted his son to a more comfortable position in his lap.

"How was learning period?" he asked.

"The same," said Boxy. "Boring."

"Boring?" Apollo asked. "What was boring about it?"

"I just don't know why we have to listen to all of that history stuff," said Boxy. "I mean, it already happened, so why do we need to know about it?"

Apollo smiled. "Because we learn from our past, Boxy."

Apollo thought for a micron. "Remember when you were playing with the access panel for the door, and you shocked yourself?"

Boxy nodded. "That really hurt."

"Well," Apollo said. "That happened in the past. It's history, but you still learned from it. If you can learn about what other people did, then you might avoid some of the same mistakes they made, or you might follow what they did, and make something better."

"Ohh," Boxy said.

"But, you can't do it, if you don't learn about it, can you?" Apollo finished.

"I guess not," Boxy said. "But it's still boring."

Apollo rolled his eyes and gave a little laugh. "I guess it can be, sometimes," he agreed. "But you still have to listen."

"Okay," said Boxy.

"Okay," Apollo repeated. "Now, go and get cleaned up. We're having dinner with Grandpa tonight."

"Yippie!" Boxy cried, and he ran for the wash station.

Apollo watched his son run from the room, his smile fading. In spite of his joy at having a son, and finding love again with Sheba, he still felt the heavy dread of not knowing.

Athena sat in the make shift shelter that Backis had put up, watching the rain fall in thick sheets. She was cold, damp, and miserable. She turned and looked behind her at Backis, lying on his back, seemingly oblivious to the occasional drop of water that fell on him through the top of the lean to.

"You can't be comfortable," she said to him.

Backis raised his hat from over his face and looked at her.

"Why not?" he asked.

Athena looked up at the "roof" which was actually a large section of wing from her crashed Raptor. Then she watched as the condensation collected, running in a tiny stream, down the inside of the panel before dripping onto Backis's shoulder.

Backis watched what she watched and smiled.

"So?" He asked. "It's only water."

"You're actually enjoying this, aren't you?" Athena asked.

"Bet your astrums," Backis said with a sigh. "We've been cooped up on that damned Battlestar for nearly three yahrens. Just breathing real air again is like walking in the gardens of heaven. Feeling real rain on my face. Total bliss."

Athena smiled in spite of herself. "You are a strange man, Backis," she said.

"No I'm not," Backis replied. "You're just too spoiled to appreciate all of this."

"I am NOT spoiled," Athena said defensively.

Backis opened his mouth to respond when a sudden boom, louder than any clap of thunder, blasted from the sky.

"That sounded like â€“" Athena started.

"Yeah," Backis replied.

The two of them ran out into the fading rain, scanning the sky. Eventually they caught sight of several distant specs, falling through the clouds.

"Shuttles?" Athena asked.

Backis watched the tiny spots for a while longer, listening intently for the sounds of the engines. Eventually the noise came over the trees, an all too familiar howl that froze the blood in both of their veins.

"Get out of sight!" Backis shouted as the two of them dove for concealment.

The four, circular shaped Cylon fighters howled over their heads as they circled the area.

"They're looking for the camp," Athena said.

The two of them ran back to the campsite and began packing their gear into the support pod. They grabbed either side of it and headed off into the surrounding jungle.

"By the way," Athena asked as they tore through the foliage. "Do you have a plan, or are we just running?"

"Right now?" Backis asked.

"Yeah!" Athena answered.

"Just running." Backis answered.

They reached the top of a low hill a few centons later. The thick foliage afforded them a view of the jungle behind them while at the same time, affording them concealment from prying Cylon sensors.

Backis dug into their supplies and removed a small pair of binoculars, raising them to his eyes and scanning the distance.

"There," he finally said. He handed the glasses to Athena and pointed.

Athena raised the binoculars to her eyes and found the place.

The four Cylon fighters sat in a clearing, resting on their landing skids while six armed centurions went about securing the perimeter.

Athena counted them, then lowered the glasses.

"Where are the rest of them?" she asked. Then she raised the glasses again, and scanned the jungle. Her gaze fell on a tiny gap in the canopy, along their escape route. She watched as several silver helmets passed through the gap, heading toward them.

"Oh, frack," she muttered.

"You didn't think they'd just give up, did you?" Backis asked, taking the glasses back and searching for the approaching enemy.

"You come up with that plan yet?" asked Athena.

Backis lowered the glasses and stared out at the jungle.

"Yup."

"Okay?" Athena asked.

"We ambush them, take them out, and take their weapons," Backis said simply.

"What?"

Backis raised the glasses again and watched as the Cylons marched past another gap in the foliage.

"I figure they'll be here in about eight to ten centons," Backis said. "That will give us enough time to set up a little surprise for them." He pointed off to one side. An ancient tree lay on its side, half covered by other growths. "You hide over there, and I'll find a spot over on the other side. As they come in, we'll smash them between us."

"You're serious," Athena said.

"Right now, they've only got twelve Centurions planet side." Backis explained. "Half of them are coming right for us." He looked down the rough path. "I'll take three to one odds over ten to one any day."

Athena looked down at the fallen tree, then back at Backis. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

The two Vipers streaked through the blackness.

In the cockpit of one, Boomer looked over at Starbuck's ship for the umpteenth time.

"Okay, Starbuck," he said. "Let's hear it."

"Hear what?" Starbuck asked.

"You haven't said more than five words since launching, so what's on your mind?" Boomer pushed.

"Nothing," Starbuck said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't," Boomer said. "Come on Starbuck."

Starbuck was silent for a while.

"You ever stop and think about all the things you've done in your life?" he asked suddenly.

"Not all at once," Boomer answered. "But I think I get what you're saying."

"I've been spending a lot of time thinking about my life," Starbuck said. "And I realized that I've made a few mistakes."

"Just a few?" asked Boomer, smiling slightly.

"Yeah," said Starbuck. "I've decided that it's time for me to start fixing a few of the problems I've caused."

"With who?" Boomer asked.

"That's not important," Starbuck said quickly.

Boomer smiled, and then looked down at his indicators.

"Looks like it's time to head back," he said.

"Just a few centons more," Starbuck said.

"Starbuck, our fuel status says we head back now. The Raptors can handle the deeper probes." Boomer said.

"Then chop your power," said Starbuck. "We'll coast."

"Chop - ?" Boomer repeated. Then he realized. "Oh, so that's what this is all about."

"What?" Starbuck replied.

"I think you know who I'm talking about," Boomer said knowingly. "Ever since you tried to pull Athena aside and talk to her, you've been like a daggit in heat."

"Boomer!" Starbuck burst out. "Look. It's nothing like that. I just, you knowâ€!"

Boomer smiled, shaking his head slightly. "Having some regrets, buddy?"

"Something like that," Starbuck admitted. "I just want to make sure I do everything I can to get Athena back."

"Back to the Galactica, or back in your life?" Boomer pressed.

"Exactly," Starbuck said.

"Come on, Starbuck," said Boomer. "We've gone as far as we can go. Time to head back."

"Come on Boomer," Starbuck pleaded.

"Look," Boomer said. "Athena's a tough girl. You're flying till you run out of fuel isn't going to help her."

He was right. Starbuck knew it, and had to accept the laws of physics and consumption.

"Frack!" He burst out.

The two Vipers rolled smoothly over and turned back towards home.

The food looked as palatable as it had several centars before, still, no one had eaten. Boxy stared at the uneaten meals around him.

"Why isn't anyone eating?" he asked. "Aren't you hungry?"

Adama snapped back from his thoughts. He looked over at his grandson, a smile on his lips.

"No Boxy, I suppose I'm not," he said.

"Is it because of Athena?" Boxy asked.

"Yes it is," Adama answered carefully. "I'm a little worried about her."

"Why?" Boxy asked innocently.

"Don't you worry about it," Adama said.

Boxy nodded, taking a bite of his food, then he looked up at his grandfather thoughtfully.

"If you're worried about her," he said. "Why not send someone to get her?"

"It's not that easy," Adama explained. "It would be dangerous for anyone to go out and find her now. The shuttles don't have any way to protect themselves. And they're too slow to run from trouble."

Boxy shrugged. "What about the ships that Athena flies? They carry more than one person."

"Yes," Adama agreed. "You're right. But we need those ships, and the Vipers to protect the fleet in case that Cylon ship comes back."

Athena crouched behind the tree, her laser in her hand. She felt the falling rain soaking through her uniform sending a shiver up her spine. Her hair hung in wet strings, and rainwater caused her eyes to sting a little.

She shifted her weight back to her other knee and looked up at where Backis had concealed himself in the thick branches of the tree.

His eyes were focused down the hill, a dark, almost feral light in them. Then he gave a subtle nod.

Athena moved forward, closer to the tree trunk, peeking cautiously over the rounded, moss covered top.

One by one, emerging from the trees like silver nightmares, the six centurions stepped into view, their rifles held at ready as their single sensor lights scanned the surrounding area for the presence of the rogue humans.

Slowly, Athena aimed her pistol at the lead centurion. It's armored head turned towards her, the bouncing red light froze, locked on her

hiding place.

"Halt!" It droned, rifle dropping to ready.

The lead centurion exploded from behind as Backis shot it in the back of the helmet. It fell forward as if struck by a train. Athena's first shot took out the centurion behind the leader.

Between the two of them, Backis and Athena made a very fast, very clean sweep. The six centurions went down in a matter of microns.

The two humans ran down the hill towards the group of steaming, smoldering bodies, quickly grabbing rifles and energy clips. They slung the weapons over their shoulders and scrambled back up the hill.

Shadow strode back into the command center of his Base ship. As he approached, Kadal turned his golden head to face his commander.

"A report from the surface," Kadal droned.

"Yes?" Shadow asked.

"The first detachment was eradicated," Kadal reported. "Remaining centurions are requesting further instructions."

"No," Shadow muttered angrily. He turned to the navigator station. "How long till we achieve orbit?"

"Two, point five centars at present speed," The silver centurion reported.

Shadow paused for a micron, his neural net lights blinking wildly as he computed.

"Prepare our landing teams, and get us into orbit as soon as possible." Then he turned to Kadal. "Order our centurions on the surface to stand vigil at the landing field, but do not pursue the humans. They will keep till later."

"By your command," Kadal droned, and he turned back to his console.

"Hi," Starbuck said.

At her station in the Life Center, Cassiopeia looked up in mild surprise.

"Hello, Starbuck," She said, smiling. "What are you doing here?"

Starbuck looked around the room nervously. "Is there someplace we could, uh, talk?" he asked.

Her smile faded slightly. "Sure." She gestured out into the corridor that joined the general room with the surgical center. "What's wrong Starbuck?" She asked.

Starbuck took a deep breath. This was not going to be easy.

Apollo sat at the desk in the Officers Club, a drink forgotten at his fingers as he lost himself in thought. He didn't even notice when Captain Milesar strode in. He stepped over to where Apollo sat at the bar, and took a seat.

"Think I'll join you," he said quietly as he motioned the bar man for a mug.

He took the mug and spun casually around, to lean against the bar.

"I thought you might want to know," he said as his mug came up. "Jodas and Tigh are meeting with the Commander as we sit here."

His eyes met Apollo's as the Blue Squadron caption turned to face him.

"You're sure?" he asked.

"On my honor," Milesar replied. "He called the meeting two centars ago. Jodas went in there with a lot of fire. I think we might be taking some action sooner than expected."

"I wonder what got my father moving?" asked Apollo.

"Don't know," Milesar said. "But if I were you, I'd stay close to the Commander after this little meeting is over. We both know there's only one ship with the range and armament to do the job."

"What about the Cylons?" Apollo asked.

Milesar shook his head. "Haven't found them, yet. But they're still out there. My guess is that they put themselves in a position between us and the planet your sister crashed on."

"How do you know?" Apollo asked.

"What would you do?" Milesar said. "If you were a Cylon commander with your back against the wall, and a Battlestar coming after you?"

Apollo felt a knot tightening in his gut.

"I'd want insurance," he said.

"I'm willing to bet that our Cylon friends are over that planet as we speak." Milesar sighed. "I'd lay a sectons pay on it."

"So what do we do?" asked Apollo.

Just then, Starbuck walked in, his usual swagger a little subdued.

One look was all Apollo needed to realize what had probably transpired.

"I don't believe it," He said. "He actually did it."

Milesar looked from Apollo over to Starbuck and then back

again.

"Did what?" he asked.

The sandy haired warrior stepped over to the two of them and ordered a mug.

Apollo looked into his friend's eyes and got the confirmation he sought.

"Starbuck?" he said. "Are you in a little bit of pain, here?"

"What?" Starbuck replied quickly. A false smile appeared on his face. "What are you talking about?"

"I think I'll let you two talk," Milesar said. He stood, looking over at Apollo. "Remember what I told you."

Apollo nodded and the Black Raptor Captain strolled casually away.

"What was that all about?" Starbuck asked in a feeble attempt to change the subject.

"I'll explain after you," Apollo said, gesturing towards the Lieutenant before wrapping both hands around his mug.

"Oh," Starbuck said. "Cass and I just needed to have a little, uh, talk" his voice dropped to his usual mumble.

"And?" Apollo asked.

"I just told her that I didn't think our lives were heading in the same, uh, direction, and so.." His voice dropped again.

"You broke everything off with her?" Apollo filled in the blank.

"Well, yeah," Starbuck admitted.

"Just like that?" Apollo pressed.

"Well," Starbuck said. "I've just got other things I want to focus on, right now."

"Like who?" Apollo was trying desperately not to smile. As before, he already knew most of what would happen, thanks to numerous communications with Chameleon, on the Senior Ship.

Starbuck fidgeted for a long time, ordered a drink, took a long swallow, and then looked Apollo in the eye with a nervous expression.

"Your sister," he said finally.

Apollo tried not to smile too broadly.

"My sister?" he asked. And he let a chuckle escape his lips.

"What?" Asked Starbuck. "What's so funny about that?"

"I don't know Starbuck," Apollo said, shaking his head slightly. "After everything that's happened between you two before and after you two were an item. I doubt if she'll ever trust you again."

"Yeah," said Starbuck, his own smile creeping across his lips. He gave a characteristic wink. "But that's the challenge, isn't it?"

Apollo's smile slowly vanished, and he looked hard at his friend.

"You better be sure about this," he cautioned. "If Athena gives you a second chance, and that is a huge if right now. Don't hurt her. You may be like a brother to me, but Athena is still my sister, and I won't have you playing with her heart a second time."

"Who, me?" Starbuck looked genuinely hurt.

"Face it Starbuck," Apollo said. "You aren't the most faithful of companions when it comes to relationships."

"Hey, now," Starbuck retorted. "That's not fair â€“"
> "Nodai, Aurora, Miriam, Alicia, Tomai, that girl on Attila,"
Apollo said ticking off the names he knew.<p>

"Alright, alright," Starbuck raised his hands. "I get your point."

"No more," Apollo said. "If Athena gives you another chance, you better be damned sure before you take it. I won't stand for her being torn again."

"It won't be like that," Starbuck professed.

"You're right," Apollo said emphatically. "It won't."

Starbuck sighed, realizing for the first time, exactly what he had started. If he got Athena back, it would have to be the real thing this time. No more academy games, no more seductions. No more quick conquests. A real, one on one committed relationship.

"Anyway," he said, changing the subject. "It doesn't look much like anything's gonna start happening until your sister gets back." He leaned back slightly. "And I don't see much action being taken towards that turn of events."

"It appears that my father, Colonel Jodas, and Colonel Tigh don't want to send a shuttle out there with the possibility of a Cylon Base ship between here and there."

"Great," said Starbuck. Then he got a familiar gleam in his eye.
"Wait a micron. We don't need a shuttle to go and get them."

"We don't?" Apollo replied. Then he recognized the look in his friends' eye. "Oh no," he said, standing up and stepping. "No way!"

He turned and walked out of the officers club.

Starbuck nodded, a smile on his face. He took a long drink and then left, running to catch up to Apollo.

Apollo strode quickly down the corridor, his emotions in turmoil. He heard Starbuck jogging to catch up to him.

"Apollo!" he called.

Apollo stopped, heaving a deep breath before he turned around.

Starbuck looked at his friend for a long time.

"Look buddy," Starbuck began. "It seems clear to me that your father and the rest of the pilots in the fleet either can't or won't do anything to get things moving."

"There could be a Cylon Base Ship between us and them," Apollo said. "As much as this whole ordeal is driving me crazy, I understand where my father is coming from. We can't send an entire force out to perform a rescue if that Base ship is anywhere near there."

"And if it isn't?" Starbuck asked. "Then what?"

"Again, we wait until the fleet is close enough for the Galactica to protect them and cover a rescue mission at the same time." Apollo replied.

"I'm not talking about sending in an entire squadron," Starbuck said. "I'm only suggesting two ships."

"Ships that neither one of us is qualified to fly," Apollo countered.

Starbuck shrugged. "We're both qualified to fly Vipers and shuttles, right?"

"Yeah," Apollo said. "So what?"

"Well," Starbuck said. "I figure those new Raptors are somewhere in between."

"Starbuck."

"Come on, Apollo!" Starbuck said. "At the rate we're moving, the Cylons could be all over that planet by now! Never mind the fact that she could have been hurt in the crash! We can't just leave her there until the fleet is closer!"

Apollo started to protest, but saw in his friends eyes that he was going to go through with his plan with or without him. He sighed.

"What have you got in mind?" he asked.

Athena and Backis sat under the cover of jungle brush watching the activity down in the Cylon landing field. In the last few centars, several processing stations had been erected and many centurions were

going about the task of setting up a mining installation.

"Looks like they need raw materials," said Backis.

"That's why they haven't come out en masse to find us," Athena nodded. She took the micro-binoculars from Backis and stared down at the growing operation. Her gaze fell on a blue robed, thin figure with a swirl of lights dancing in the transparent dome of its head. The face plate and hands of the IL series Cylon were a deep midnight blue, in contrast to the metallic cobalt blue and silver weave of his robes.

"I'll be spaced," Athena murmured.

"What?" asked Backis.

"It looks like the Command Cylon is down there in person," Athena said, passing the micro-binoculars back.

"What?" Backis snatched the binoculars and put them to his eyes, scanning the field.

"Where is he?"

"Down by the supply dump," Athena said.

Backis adjusted his view and finally smiled. "Got him." He read the range on the top of the display. "If we were a hundred metrons closer, I could take him out."

"Don't even think about it," Athena said sharply. "We need to get clear of here as fast as we can. Once they're done setting everything up down there, they're gonna be all over this place looking for us!"

Backis looked at her, and then back at his would be target and sighed.

"I could make that shot, too," he said.

"I don't doubt it," Athena replied. "But not this time. Come on."

She rose and went over to the survival pod. "Let's get this thing and get out of here."

"You're the boss, Boss" Backis said. Athena smiled.

"Don't you forget it," she said with a wry smile.

The two of them continued deeper into the dense jungle.

As they traveled through the thick foliage, the fading sunlight began to darken at a quicker pace, and Athena heard the tell-tale signs of another storm brewing as thunder rolled off in the distance.

"Oh, great," she said.

"We're gonna need to stop for the night soon anyway," Backis replied. "Might as well start looking."

In the end, they found something that showed promise. Half way down another short hill, they found a mound with an opening, half covered by thick, vine like growths.

Backis removed the mirror smooth bayonet from one of their stolen Cylon rifles, and cleared the opening, peeking inside with a portable lamp.

"This looks interesting," he said. "Almost as if someone constructed a dwelling here?"

"Maybe someone did?" Suggested Athena.

Backis looked about the floor at the dirt and grime, watching as several insectile creatures scurried away from the encroaching light.

"Perhaps," he said. "But no one has been here for a long, long time."

He stepped up into the entrance and vanished.

After a few microns of silence, Athena poked her head in.

"Well?" she asked.

"Boss?" Backis said from within. "I think you want to come in here."

Athena suppressed a shudder. There was a haunted tone in Backis's voice.

"What is it?" she asked, pulling her own lamp out and shining the harsh white beam into the place.

She stood inside a rather large room, with thick tangles of creeping growth hanging off to her left. The unkempt vines snaked half way across the dusty floor before stopping. A second cluster of vines tumbled through an opening in the roof, looking like a column of thick tangled weeds. An eerie sensation of familiarity began to crawl through her, bringing goose bumps to the surface of her flesh.

She stepped further into the place and heard the familiar sound of her boot on a metal floor. Looking down, she used her foot to brush aside the thin layer of grime to reveal the textured, metallic surface beneath. Her eyes and light quickly panned all around at the corners, walls, ceiling, and her mouth fell open as the shock built.

"Tell me I'm not insane," she said breathlessly.

"If you are," said Backis. "Then my brain is no better than stale mushy."

Athena stepped past the column of growth in the center of the room and walked along the far wall, seeing the familiar protuberances that indicated overhead storage compartments.

"This is an ancient colonial shuttle," she finally gasped. Only then

did she actually believe it.

She quickly reached for the Cylon rifle on her shoulder and began scything through the thick vines at the front of the wreck.

"What are you doing?" Backis asked.

Athena didn't here him. She hacked away at the plant life choking the pilot's station, pulling and throwing the cut vines out of her way.

"Give me a hand here," she said earnestly.

Backis stepped up and began hacking away on the other side.

"There's a reason for this, right?" he asked.

She nodded, but said nothing as she cut her way deeper and deeper into the front of the ship. As she reached the pilots seat, she slipped and fell to the floor, her eyes rising to the decayed and crumbling shape of an old uniform boot. The long, dark gray shin bone protruding up from within the garment, and vanishing into the rest of the foliage.

"Whoa!" she squealed as she scrambled back, her breath coming in startled heaves.

"What?" Backis asked.

"He's still there," Athena said quickly.

"Who's still where?"

"The pilot." Athena continued.

"Pilot?" Backis asked.

Athena fought her racing heart back down. "He's still sitting at the controls."

Backis nodded and began cutting over by Athena's side. He proceeded a bit more slowly now, being careful not to go too far, too fast.

"Maybe he's still waiting for launch clearance," Backis said with a wry smile.

Eventually, Athena rejoined him, and they cleared the debris away. Backis was the one to reveal the pilots' face, a fleshless, time grayed skull, with a slack-hanging jawbone.

"Hello there," he said to the bones.

Athena looked over in the direction and saw the skull, lying back on the top of the seat, the eye sockets seeming to stare right at her. She swallowed, forcing back all the childhood fears that came racing to the surface. After a while longer, Backis had managed to clear the entire area, revealing only the hollowed bones of a body, with a few tattered bits of ancient fabric clinging to them.

"How long do you think he's been here?" Athena asked nervously.

Backis looked down at the bones and shrugged.

"A very long time," he said. "My guess would be, centuries." He gestured to the cut vines and plants that now littered the floor behind them.

"Between the plants, and the fact that all the organic components of the interior are gone." He said. Then he gestured to where the viewports used to be. "Plus the time it would take for the vegetation to crack through the transparent tylinium, "I'd venture a guess at three, maybe four hundred yahren. Could be more." He shrugged.

"Nagon's the history buff in the squadron. He'd be going orbital if he were here right now."

As an afterthought, Backis rubbed his chin. "I wonder which ship he was from?"

The two of them continued working, slowly clearing all the vines from the cockpit area, and even opening a few spots to allow the fading light in. With the cut vines, they concealed the entrance and the rest of the ship as best they could, before settling in for the next wave of violent storms. Backis cleared the area under the circular opening and prepared a small fire, which chased the shadows out of the chamber, revealing even more detail.

"I wonder if we can get into the cargo hold?" Athena asked after a long pause, listening to the raindrops as they pelted the roof.

"I wonder if there even is a cargo hold," Backis replied. He munched silently on a dried ration bar, his eyes focused on the top of the dead pilot. That one question was still rampaging through his mind.

"Which ship are you from?" he whispered again quietly, almost hoping the skeletal form would rise and turn to face them.

"What was that?" Athena asked from the other side of the room.

Backis said nothing, his eyes fixed intently on the bones.

In a sudden convulsion of movement, he sprang to his feet and stepped quickly over to the skeleton. His eyes scanned the surface of the bones, and then the grimy, surface behind them as he slowly sank to a crouching position, his hand coming up to rub his chin in thought.

"What are you doing?" Athena asked.

Backis pointed at the bony occupant of the seat.

"He was a warrior, or at the very least a commissioned pilot, yes?" He asked.

Athena shrugged. "I would assume so."

"Then unless he was a chronic nudist," Backis continued. "Or a ship

thief, we could safely assume he was in uniform when the ship was in flight."

Again Athena nodded, a confused look on her face. "Sure."

Backis looked at the skull for a long micron, and then stood up, standing close to the body.

"Excuse me," he said to the fleshless face, and he began pulling the body, from the seat, bone by bone.

"BACKIS!" Athena hissed in horror. "What in Hades are you doing?"

"He's dead, Athena," Backis said without looking up. "I don't think he'll mind."

Athena opened her mouth to speak, but found no words. She simply stared as Backis quickly removed the remnants of the body. That task complete, he took out his portable lamp, and then fell on all fours, scrabbling in the dirt beneath the pilot seat, the powerful lamp beam giving the ground under the seat to shimmer with garish white light.

"Would you mind telling me what you're doing?" Athena asked as her gaze shifted nervously from where her partner knelt behind the seat, then back to the human remains on the floor.

She started slightly when Backis let out a cry of triumph. He shuffled back and rose to his knees with two blackened lumps resting in the palm of his hand.

Athena frowned. "What are those?"

"The only part of a uniform that won't disintegrate," Backis replied. He smiled broadly, and then tapped the lieutenants' insignia on the collar of his uniform. "Rank and ship insignia."

"Ah," Athena said with a smile growing across her face. "So which ship was he from?"

Backis looked down at the dirt encrusted pieces.

He stared at them for a micron, rubbing some of the dirt off with his fingers and then sighed.

"I have no idea." He finally admitted. He slipped the dirty pins into the inner pocket of his jacket and looked over at the pile of bones on the floor.

After a few microns, he looked up at Athena.

"I think it's time to see what our shiny friends are doing," he said. He got to his feet and grabbed one of the Cylon rifles, checking the power level.

"Shall we?" he asked.

Athena blinked. Backis quirky shifts were tough to follow. It was a side of him she had never seen before. His focus seemed to be

slipping the longer he stayed out of the cockpit.

"You okay, Backis?" She asked.

"Yeah," Backis replied. "I'm fine." Then he stopped. "I'm getting a little jittery, aren't I?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Athena.

Her nervousness must have shown, because Backis let out a sigh, and forced himself to take a deep breath.

"Don't worry, Boss," he reassured her. "I haven't really slept since we landed, and it's making me a little punchy."

"A little punchy?" Athena repeated. One dark eyebrow rose slightly.

"Okay, fine," Backis said. "A LOT punchy, okay?"

Athena nodded.

"I'll try to keep level," Backis continued. "Shall we go?"

Athena grabbed another of the rifles and the micro binoculars, and followed Backis out into the slowing rain.

The rainwater felt cool on her face, driving the warm humidity away from her as she felt it soaking into her hair and clothes. It also succeeded in rinsing away some of the dirt and grime that stained her uniform and face. As they walked, she stopped in front of a small puddle and scooped several handfuls of water up, rinsing her face off.

Her hair hung past her face in wet strands, and she quickly tried to tie it back into a ponytail.

"You look beautiful, Boss," Backis said a little impatiently. "Let's go."

Shadow strolled through the newly constructed command center on the surface, the moisture from the outside atmosphere shimmering on the transparent dome of his head.

Beyond the shelter of the self-erecting structure, he could see silver centurions moving to and fro across the main area, preparing to initiate the mining systems.

As he watched, the Golden, gleaming form of Kadal strode towards him.

"Report," Shadow said, once the giant centurion stood before him.

Rivulets of water rolled down the massive golden frame. The red eye sensor bounced back and forth in the visor of the helmet.

"Something interesting within the first drill shaft," Kadal droned. "An unusually rich deposit of raw tylinium."

"Indeed?" Shadow asked. "Have samples been brought to the surface for analysis?"

"Affirmative," Kadal droned. "The results were rather interesting."

"How so?" Shadow asked.

"The primary base material had manufactured properties," Kadal continued dutifully. "An inspection team was sent to the site to verify the findings."

"Yes?"

Kadal hesitated for several microns, as if his processors were unsure of how to respond.

"I really think you should see the results yourself," he finally suggested.

Shadow looked out past Kadal's massive golden shoulder, watching the falling rain.

If his metallic face could have shifted to a grimace, it would have.

"Oh, very well," he said, his voice laced thickly with disgust.

Shadow followed his second in command through the mud and rain to the primary dig site at the base of a low ridge. The sonic cutters had done a marvelous job slicing into the living rock and opening a circular tunnel almost eight metrons in diameter. From within, Shadow could see the dull yellow glow of the recently installed service lights.

A single centurion sat at the controls of a hauler. From the front of the haul, a thick, silvery cable extended, vanishing into the shadows of the tunnel.

As Shadow watched, he could see a silhouette moving closer to the entrance, attached to the other end of the cable. As it passed between the lights, Shadow stood perfectly still, the falling rain, no longer distracting him.

At the opposite end of the cable, being dragged along the tunnel floor like the decreped remains of a fallen bird, were the remains of a ship. A ship that was distinctly Colonial in design.

"Well, well," Shadow mused. He stepped forward into the tunnel, staring at the ship as it slid across the rocky ground. Kadal stood behind him.

"That is not the only thing we have found," Kadal droned. His voice echoed in the confines of the tunnel.

Shadow turned and looked up at his lieutenant.

"There's more?" he asked.

"At the back end of the tunnel," Kadal droned.

Shadow turned and strode carefully down the tunnel to what appeared to be an opening into a larger chamber.

He stepped through and came to a halt. The chamber was enormous in size. The floor of it was unusually smooth for a natural rock formation. As he watched several centurions hung more of the garish lights in the place.

Instead of affixing the lights to the bedrock, however, the lights were begin hung on ancient cross girders, and support pylons. Dusty and corroded wall plates and ancient sealed hatchways.

Shadow stared up at the tiny stalactite like growths that had just taken hold in the roughly angular ceiling.

Shadow knew, without having to confirm anything, that he was standing in the remains of an ancient ship. An ancient Colonial ship.

"Contact the Base Ship," Kadal instructed. "Tell them to do an intense sensor sweep of the area. I want the results ready for me when I arrive."

"By your command," Kadal droned.

Shadow turned and saw the tumbled pile of slowly fusing stone, about forty metrons further into what was obviously a landing bay.

"Furthermore," he said. "I want you to continue excavating this site, but salvage and process only the remains of smaller, fighter size vehicles. Do NOT process a single bolt from the superstructure."

Again Kadal droned. "By your command." The giant golden centurion turned and strode away, leaving Shadow to his own musings.

"I wonder which ship this is?" he asked.

Colonel Jodas sat motionless staring up at Captain Milesar, his face unreadable. A half-full glass of ambrosia resting in his fingers.

"No," he finally said.

"What?" Milesar couldn't believe his ears.

Jodas shook his head, setting the glass down on his desk. "I can appreciate what you're offering, but the answer has to be, no."

"Colonel," Milesar continued. "Rega had the best piloting score of the squadron. He's the best candidate to pilot the extra ship!"

"I understand that," Jodas nodded.

"Then let me take a group of Raptors out there and bring our people back!" Milesar fought to control his temper, but nearly two days of

nothing except waiting was wearing thin on him. "We blast in, Rega and I land. Athena and Backis grab one ship, and Rega jumps back in with me! Quick and simple!" He watched Jodas's stony face for a few microns longer, waiting for an answer.

When it appeared that none was forthcoming he finally exploded.

"Dammit, Colonel! Those are my people out there!"

"Check that, Captain!" Jodas barked loudly. His eyes took on a darker hue.

Milesar stood still, forcing his anger down with several deep breaths.

"I can appreciate how you feel, Captain," Jodas said. "I don't think I have to remind you that each of you are also one of MY people."

"Sir," Milesar started.

"Shut up, Captain!" Jodas bellowed. "You have a job to do! That job is to protect this fleet until other options are presented. Am I clear?"

Defeated, Milesar nodded.

"AM I CLEAR?" Jodas repeated loudly.

Milesar straightened to attention. "Yes, Colonel!" he barked, only this time his answer was filled with contempt.

"Get your butt out of my office," Jodas growled.

Milesar turned on his heels and stormed out of the room.

His anger and frustration carried his feet in the direction of the launching bay. As he entered, he watched the lights dim, signaling the bay being brought to stand by mode. Several techs moved towards the ready room, clearly finished with their duty period.

He was about to turn back when he caught a quick movement from the shadows on the other side of the bay.

His eyes narrowed as he fought to see the figure in the deepening gloom.

He finally caught the silhouette of a man dressed in a warrior's uniform, moving towards the holding area for the Black Raptor's ships. A second figure followed a few microns behind, checking over his shoulder as he followed.

"What are you two up to?" Milesar asked in a whisper. He drew his laser and set it for stun. Then he slowly made his way towards the ships from the opposite direction.

The two culprits stood on the boarding ladder that extended from the bottom of the Raptor's fuselage. They seemed to be trying to familiarize themselves with the controls, speaking in quick, quiet

whispers.

Milesar eased up behind and below the two men, his laser pointed at their backs. Once he was set, he clicked off the safety of the weapon.

"Stay perfectly still, gentlemen," he said in a low growl.

"Frack," Starbuck mouthed, his eyes closing. He and Apollo froze, suspended above the hanger floor, with one hand holding onto the side of the Raptor's cockpit, and one foot each on the small rungs of the boarding ladders.

Slowly he and Apollo turned to face their captor. When the man below saw them, his mouth dropped open slightly in surprise.

"Captain Apollo? Lieutenant Starbuck?" He stammered. "What in the seven moons do you two think you're doing?"

"Uh, just looking," Starbuck said quickly.

"Really?" Milesar let his weapon drop back into its holster, while his eyes fell on the flight helmet each of them held in their hands. He looked over at Apollo.

"Just a little harmless window shopping, right?"

"Yeah," Apollo said. However, expression on his face and the irrefutable evidence of the helmets, gave the entire scheme away.

Milesar let a smile touch the corners of his mouth. "Checking out the differences in the control circuitry? Comparing it to the Viper's setup? That sort of thing?"

"Yeah," Starbuck said quickly, as he dropped down to the floor.
"That's it exactly."

> "It's not like you were going to steal one and take it for a joy ride, or anything?" Milesar continued.<p>

Apollo and Starbuck froze for a micron at that, and gave Milesar the confirmation he needed.

"Planning a little test flight, were we?" he asked.

"Uh," Starbuck stammered.

"We were," said Apollo. He looked down at Starbuck and let himself drop to the floor. "Two ships, one pilot each, land, pick them up and get out." He confessed.

Milesar smiled. "Great minds think alike," he thought.

"Well," Apollo said with a sigh. "So much for that plan." He moved to leave, but Milesar held up his hand.

"Well," he began. "For one thing, you need to look at the right ships." He gestured for the two would-be thieves to follow him.

The two ships he led them to sat patiently, a few stalls back. The

major difference between these two ships, and the others, was that these two, along with the pair next to them, were set up with a large, oblong external fuel cell. It hung like an ancient bomb, between the rear landing gear.

Milesar's voice took on the air of a tour guide, adding to Apollo and Starbuck's confusion.

"With the external drop tanks," he explained. "You'll have even more fuel for extended voyages." He sighed. "However, it reduces your total load of missiles by two."

He dropped the access steps from the fuselage and hit the switch to open the canopies. Then he faced Apollo and Starbuck.

"Now," he asked. "What do you need to know?"

"Scuse me?" Starbuck stammered.

"What do you need to know?" Milesar repeated. When neither warrior spoke, Milesar continued.

"I just finished going round and round with Colonel Jodas on this, proposing the same plan. He refused, and if I were to do what you two are planning, I'd be open to a court marshal. If you two do it, then I'm off the hook, and neither of you ever knew that Jodas ordered all the Raptors held to ground because you're not in the squadron." His eyebrows rose slightly.

A smile began to spread across Starbuck's face. "I get it," he said. "Apollo and I high tail it outta here, and you go someplace where you won't be missed."

"Exactly," Milesar replied. He stepped up between them, and then ducked under the nose, dropping the second set of access rungs down, and climbed up.

Starbuck and Apollo clambered back up across from the Black Raptor Captain.

"Okay," Milesar began. "In a nutshell, here it is." And he quickly took them through the control systems and specs of the Raptor.

After a centar straight, Apollo and Starbuck were reeling as they tried to sort through the data.

"You got all that?" Milesar asked, looking at the two thieves.

"Uh, sure," Starbuck said, his eyes moving rapidly over the semi-familiar controls. "No problem."

Milesar favored the Lieutenant with a sardonic look. "No problem, huh?" he asked.

Apollo looked nervously towards the lift car, and access hatches, fearful that they would be discovered.

"Captain?" Milesar continued.

"I got most of it," Apollo confessed. "I'll learn the rest as I

go."

Milesar nodded. "At least your honest." He dropped down and stowed the access ladder. Apollo did the same, while Starbuck climbed into the forward seat of the Raptor, slipping his helmet over his head.

Milesar helped Apollo get settled in the other ship.

"Why are you helping us, anyway?" Apollo asked.

"Because your sister is one of my people," Milesar said. "If it wasn't you, then I'd be doing the exact same thing you are right now." He looked over at Starbuck. "I'd just be doing it alone. At least you have a partner you can trust."

"And that's why?" Apollo asked.

"Partially," Milesar answered, as a smile crept across his face. "Also because I know that Starbuck'll do this, with or without my input. And you're just crazy enough to do it with him."

He patted Apollo's shoulder. "Keep the throttles at quarter power until you reach the launch point, then, push to full. Don't use the turbos or the lift will slam you right into the top of the launch bay."

Apollo gave him a thumbs up and settled back into the cockpit.

"Give me five centons to get clear, then fire up the starter unit, the rest is academic."

"Thanks, Milesar," Apollo said.

Milesar patted Apollo's shoulder once more, and then dropped to the floor, moving quickly and quietly away from the two, soon-to-be-stolen ships.

The twin canopies closed with a whine of hydraulic motors.

"You sure about this, Starbuck?" Apollo asked.

"Yup," Starbuck replied without hesitation.

Apollo actually let a smile cross his face. "I gotta be honest," he said. "I've always wanted to fly one of these monsters."

"Funny," Starbuck countered. "I was thinking the exact same thing. Shall we?"

Apollo's finger hovered over the initiate button.

"Let's go," he said quietly.

A low whine began in the Beta launch bay. By the time it had reached a quiet wail, the techs were scrambling from their quarters, running towards the two ships.

"Fire em up!" Apollo ordered, and the four massive engine outlets glowed white hot, throwing gusts of heated air behind

them.

"Remember, Starbuck!" Apollo cautioned. "Quarter throttle till the launch mark, and then go full. No turbos!"

"No problem!" Starbuck actually sounded like he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

The two ships turned lazily, taxiing towards the launch point. Beyond the invisible bubble of the opening, the stars beckoned.

Over the com speaker, Apollo heard the voice of Colonel Jodas.

"Milesar! You little snitrad!" He shouted. "I'll have your tail in a sling if you move an inch further! You hear me?"

Starbuck looked over at Apollo, his entire face, begging to reply to Jodas's ranting, but Apollo shook his head and crossed his hand over his throat. Then he pointed out towards the stars.

Starbuck grinned and pushed the throttles to full, sending the Raptor speeding out towards the stars.

Apollo looked over and saw several armed security men running toward him, and he quickly throttled up, following after Starbuck.

The two ships shot from beneath the Galactica and turned their dark noses towards the depths of space.

The power of the Raptor felt like a low thrum, moving through the ship in waves. Starbuck reached over and activated his scanner. Then he switched the com to a different frequency. He signaled the channel to Apollo, via hand signals.

"What is it Starbuck?" Apollo asked.

"I'm not sure I know which way I'm looking, but my scanner shows a whole bunch of blips coming at us." Starbuck replied.

Apollo craned his neck and saw the tri winged shapes of a squadron of Vipers, rocketing towards them, turbos blazing.

"You locked on course?" Apollo asked.

"Yup."

"Good," Apollo continued. "I think we need to pick up the pace a bit."

Starbuck craned his neck and saw the twelve ships heading for them.

"Oh, boy!" he said, and he activated the boosters, his finger hovering over the turbo button.

"Let's go," Apollo said, and the two ships spewed fountains of flame as the massive turbos propelled them forward.

Despite himself, Starbuck let out a whoop of exhilaration as they

began pulling away from their pursuers.

"Frack!" Sheba thought as she watched the two rogue ships pulling steadily away from her group. She keyed the com for the Galactica.

"Core Command," she said. "The Raptors have engaged turbos. We are unable to keep up. Requesting further instructions."

She knew the answer, even before Rigel's voice came back to her over the speakers.

"Silver-Spar squadron, return to base."

"Understood," Sheba replied. "Come on Bojay, let's take them home."

In his Viper, Bojay watched the two drive tails as they faded into the darkness. Both of them knew that Apollo was in one of those ships, and Starbuck was most likely piloting the other.

Sheba pursed her lips, wondering quickly if she should hail them. She had known, by the way Apollo had been distancing himself that he was on the verge of doing something like this. She also knew that Starbuck was the one person who would get him to act on that impulse.

"Good luck, Apollo," she whispered as she reluctantly turned her ship around and headed back home.

Colonel Jodas came boiling onto the bridge, his eyes alive with the brilliant fire of anger as he stepped up to the command station. Commander Adama, likewise, had a dark, ominous look in his eyes.

"Commander," Jodas said darkly. "Permission to take some more Raptors and run those daggits down?"

Adama thought for a long micron. "Can you catch them?"

"If we launch quickly enough," Jodas replied. "We just might."

Adama gave a nod, and Jodas keyed the com for the Black Raptors Ready Room.

"Raptors?" Milesar's voice came back over the speaker.

Jodas blinked in surprise.

"Captain Milesar?" Jodas asked, barely hiding his surprise. "Who's unaccounted for in your squad right now?"

"Sir?" Milesar sounded genuinely surprised.

"Who's not there!" Jodas barked, quickly losing patience.

"One micron, please, Colonel," Milesar clicked off.

Jodas's fingers tapped angrily on the side of the console as his rage built to explosive levels.

In the Black Raptor's office, Milesar sat at his desk, stifling a laugh as he looked over to Brie, Justi, and Nagon.

Quickly composing himself, Milesar took a deep breath and reconnected the circuit.

"Colonel?" he asked.

"What!" Jodas's voice practically blasted from the speaker.

"Uh," Milesar paused, stalling as much as he could.

"The only people currently unaccounted for are Flight Sgt. Brie and Lt. Nagon." He looked at Brie and Nagon's face as their eyes went wide with surprise. Nagon flashed Milesar a threatening gaze. Milesar waved his hand at them, stopping protests.

"I believe Lt. Nagon was taking a shuttle over to see his family on the Gemonise Freighter, and Flight Sgt. Brie is in the Officers club, according to her RO?"

The slight hiss of the speaker only added to the long, growl that they heard.

"Captain Milesar," Jodas said with a razor edge in his voice.

"Confirm the whereabouts of Nagon and Brie, and then get your astrums to my office, pronto! Is that clear?"

"Yes, Colonel," Milesar replied.

"Have the four ER Raptors ready to fly in five centons!" Jodas finished.

"You got it," Milesar finished, his smile spreading. He broke the connection as Jodas signed off with a huff.

"I can't believe you did that!" Brie shouted at him in shock.

Justi squeezed her eyes shut as she tried to stifle her own laughter while Nagon and Brie both verbally assaulted their commanding officer.

Milesar looked down at his chrono, allowing the tirade to run for a few microns. Then he held up a finger, commanding silence.

"You," he pointed at Nagon. "The Canaris leaves in twenty centons. Go visit your parents." He turned to Brie. "And you, young lady," He began to smile again. "Go to the Officers Club and get a drink."

Both verbal barrages ceased.

"You both have air tight alibis now," Milesar continued. "Don't mess them up."

"And what are you going to do?" asked Nagon. "We all know that the Colonel didn't believe you for a micron."

"Doesn't matter," Justi jumped in. She nodded towards Milesar. "He

bought himself about twenty to thirty centons while he goes out and "confirms your whereabouts" and then also discovers that two of the extended range Raptors were the ones stolen. The fact that the Colonel doesn't believe him is irrelevant." Her smile widened as she saw the understanding in Milesar's face. "The Captain here, as "plausible deniability" on his side. All of us have been covered. Me because I reported that I saw Brie heading for the Officers Club, and the two of you because your whereabouts can be confirmed by eyewitnesses or passenger manifests." She looked respectively to Brie and then Nagon.

"Provided, of course, that you're there in time to catch the shuttle," Milesar finished, looking at Nagon.

Quickly, Nagon and Brie exited the room, one heading for the launching bay, and the other towards the Officers Club.

Milesar looked at Justi and smiled.

"Wait five centons, or so," he said.

"I know," Justi said. Then her face sobered. "Do you think they'll make it?" She asked, referring to Apollo and Starbuck.

Milesar shrugged. "I hope so."

Shadow looked at the newly constructed and activated Centurions standing at attention in front of the processing center. They were physically identical to the other Centurions, with one exception. Their armor plating lacked the silver shine that was common to the Centurion soldiers.

It was only a matter of aesthetics, really. Besides, the dull gray of these Centurions would be less visible than the shining counterparts.

"Phalanx four," Kadal droned. "Move to guard positions around the perimeter."

The thirty gray centurions turned and marched to their appointed positions.

Shadow watched them depart, trying to ignore the rainwater weighing down his robes.

"What progress is there in the excavation?" he asked.

"The work proceeds," Kadal droned. "Drill team seven breached the main bridge, three centons ago."

"Excellent," Shadow said. "Come with me."

Athena and Backis knelt in the brush, high above the growing Cylon operation.

Backis watched the group of gray Centurions as they moved to perimeter positions.

"They're really cranking those ground troops out fast," he said. "They must have hit a really good batch of raw materials."

Athena nodded, taking the micro-binoculars from Backis and panning them over the growing complex.

As she gazed around, her eyes fixed on a massive hauler. The silver cable extended into the massive opening.

As she watched, the load at the end of the cable came out into view. Her mouth fell open in disbelief as she stared at the age-tarnished hulk. She pulled the binoculars away and found the zoom control. With the image enhanced and sharpened, she made out the dark details of a wrecked ship, dragging across the muddied earth.

"This is a dream," she whispered. "A very, very bad dream."

"What?" Backis asked.

She handed the micro binoculars to her partner. "Tell me I'm seeing things," she said.

"That's the second time you've said something along those lines," Backis smiled. He found the wreck as it was being dragged towards the furnace building.

Much to her surprise, Backis reacted with calm certainty.

"Definitely an antique," he commented. "Boy, Nagon would love this."

"You're not as surprised as I am?" Athena asked.

"Not really," Backis replied. "The shuttle we found appeared to have been shot down. We normally won't send a shuttle out without fighter protection unless we're VERY sure that the area is secured. I doubt that policy has changed much over the millennia."

They stayed on that hilltop, taking turns watching the progress of the operation.

When the number of ships pulled from the hole hit six, Athena and Backis concluded that the shuttles escort must have crashed close together. When the number reached twelve, that theory was cast into considerable doubt. As night fell, and the harsh yellow lamps of the complex came on, the count had reached thirty-two ancient derelicts pulled from the cave.

Athena looked over at her sleeping companion. Despite the fear of being out in the open, and the fear of being discovered by the swelling ranks of Cylons working below her, she was powerfully curious. The fact that the commander of the Base Ship had stayed on the surface, risking exposure to both the elements and attack merely fed the curious drive that built within her. She felt an almost irresistible pull towards the gaping maw down below. The rational side of her mind told her that walking into that place was suicidal. Still the desire grew.

She watched as yet another pile of debris was pulled from the opening.

"What in blazes is down there?" she whispered out loud.

She watched the blue robed IL series Cylon move gingerly through the muddy yard into the cave.

When the Cylon leader failed to emerge after forty centons, Athena knew she had to get inside the complex and see what in the nine skies was in there. She glanced over at Backis's sleeping form and then stared down at the complex, a daring and dangerous plan forming in her mind.

Shadow stood amidst the dust and decay, and felt the opportunities arise in his consciousness.

He stood motionless in the hatchway, taking in his surroundings with acute interest. All the terminals, computer stations, monitors, equipment, command consoles, and readouts were dark and smashed, black scorch marks looked like stained blossoms on the walls or painted weeds growing from the edges of the equipment. Chairs rested in front of long abandoned stations, or lay discarded on the dust covered metal floor. Several Centurions were in the process of removing the final piles of rubble, caked against the wall where the thick transparent viewport used to be.

"My, my, my," Shadow chuckled. He stepped into the room and began strolling slowly about, inspecting the layout and storing it in his memory.

"So, this is the bridge of a Colonial Battlestar," he continued, turning slightly to acknowledge his golden second in command. "Very interesting."

He slowly climbed the steps to the command platform and looked out towards the viewport.

"What is the condition of the main computer core?" he asked. One metallic hand lightly touched the smashed keyboard in front of him.

"Unknown at this time," Kadal droned. "Survey team seven has not yet reached that chamber."

"Hmmm," Shadow mused. "What about the identification of this vessel?"

"Markings indicate that the vessel was called Prometheus." Kadal replied. "We have no record of such a ship ever existing."

"Indeed," Shadow replied. "Yet, here we are?"

Kadal stood still, his red eye sensor bouncing back and forth ominously. The golden centurion did not answer, and Shadow understood that he probably would not. Despite the memory upgrades done to command level centurions, they were still limited to strict logical lines of reasoning. Any extraneous or illogical lines of reason were usually disregarded or dumped.

Shadow let his eye sensors scan his surroundings again as he mused.

"The Battlestar Prometheus," he said to himself. "I have a suspicion that this ship was not built in the colonies."

"But it is a Colonial Battlestar," Kadal replied.

"Kadal," Shadow said impatiently. "You really must learn to appreciate the creative aspects of the universe. Accept the illogic as well as the logic."

"That statement does not correlate," Kadal replied.

Shadow sighed. "Nevermind, Kadal. Nevermind. Supervise the recovery of the ships' computer core, and make sure it is transferred up to the Base Ship without delay."

"By your command," Kadal replied, and he withdrew, leaving Shadow to his musings.

Shadow quickly accessed the neural net and downloaded the history of the Colonies, searching for any correlation. When he finally whittled the possibilities down, he chuckled to himself.

"Of course," he thought. He turned and began wandering throughout the wreck.

Jodas was seething with fury and frustration as he paced back and forth in Adama's office.

"I know the damned daggit did it!" he growled. "After the back and forth we had in my office, he HAS to be the one behind it!"

"You need to be absolutely certain, Colonel," Adama cautioned.

"I AM certain!" Jodas's voice fell to a more respectful tone as he realized whom he was venting at. "There isn't anyone else that could have pulled this off." He stopped the thought as a possible realization hit him.

"No one?" Adama raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, Hades no," Jodas said under his breath as the door chime sounded.

"Enter!" Adama said, and the hatch slid open.

Captain Milesar strode quickly and smartly into the room.

"Well, Captain?" Adama asked, already knowing the answer.

"All Black Raptor personnel are accounted for, sir," Milesar said. He flipped open a binder and produced a copy of the Canaris Shuttle's passenger manifest. "Nagon boarded the shuttle for the Gemonise freighter fifteen centons before departure, and Flight Sergeant Brie was found in the officers club. All other personnel were in the billet room or simulator on regular training rotation."

Adama took the report, his eyes scanning it quickly.

"What about the pursuit team?" Jodas growled.

Milesar swallowed and put on his best apologetic face.

"Team two's ships were disconnected and the backup batteries discharged," He reported with as much grimness as he could muster. He hesitated slightly as he continued. "Uh â€“" team two's ships were the ones that were stolen â€“" he let his voice drop off. In the back of his mind, he thanked the Lords of Kobal for the classes in theatrics back in his middle school days.

Jodas let both fists open and close as his breathing began to increase in depth and speed.

"How long?" he asked, indicating the delay in refitting and re energizing the ships.

"We'll have two ER teams ready to go in â€“" he consulted his chrono. "About fifteen centons. I ordered a refit on two other ships instead of recharging team one's systems."

Jodas gave a grunt and a nod. "Too long," he admitted.

"Sir?" Milesar asked. He was beginning to feel the weight of the two men's eyes on him. "I will not crack now," he thought to himself.

"It would appear that the thieves have covered all the bases," Adama admitted. He sighed.

However, Jodas was not so easily dissuaded. "Are they still in range of the standard Raptors?"

Milesar thought for a micron and slowly began to shake his head. "Chancy," he said. "We might be able to catch them, but if they decided to get nasty, we wouldn't have enough fuel for a sustained fight."

Jodas turned and paced a few steps away from his subordinate, cursing elaborately as he did so. Then he wheeled around and jabbed his finger in Milesar's direction.

"You - !" he began.

"Colonel!" Adama said sharply.

Jodas fought the fire of his rage back down. "Dismissed, Captain." He growled.

"Thank you, Colonel," Milesar replied sharply. Then, with a quick nod to Adama, he turned and strode out of the room.

Adama waited till the hatch slid completely closed after the retreating Captain. Then he turned his eyes back to Jodas.

Jodas simply watched the sealed hatch for a micron and then began to nod, his whole body trembling. "He helped them do it," he said with barely contained fury. "I KNOW it!"

"How?" Adama asked.

"Because, I trust my gut," Jodas replied. "And my gut says that he is

involved!"

"We both know who has those ships," Adama said grimly. "I can only hope that they will be alright."

Milesar heard the hatch hiss behind him, and he let out a breath that he didn't even realize he had been holding. The adrenaline rush hit him in a wave and he fought the slight dizziness from his mind. Quickly, he withdrew and headed for the officers club and a much needed strong drink.

Brie and Justi were in the club waiting for him when he entered, a thin sheen of perspiration glistening on his face.

He slipped into the couch across from the two ladies and took a long drink, wiping the sweat from his face with a napkin.

"Well?" asked Brie nervously.

"He knows," Milesar admitted. "But he can't prove a thing."

The three conspirators all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"So, what now?" Justi whispered. Her eyes flitted around the room, afraid that someone might hear her.

"Now?" Milesar answered. He shook his head. "Now, we wait, hope, and a prayer or two might also be in order." He drained his first mug and signaled for a second.

"So?" Starbuck asked, glancing over at the ship next to his. "What do you think?"

Apollo looked back over at his partner.

"About what?" he asked.

"About what?" Starbuck repeated. "The Raptor! What do you think?"

He saw Apollo give a shrug. "I think I prefer my Viper."

"Are you kidding?" Starbuck asked.

"Maybe if we hadn't stole them, I'd be enjoying myself more," Apollo said after a long pause.

"Yeah," Starbuck answered. "But, if you think about it. We really didn't steal them."

"What?" Apollo replied.

"Think about it!" Starbuck retorted. "We received permission and instruction from the Squadron Commander, prior to takeoff."

"So?"

"So, I would call that a pre-flight briefing," Starbuck smiled. "Wouldn't you?"

"That's thin, Starbuck," Apollo commented. "Very, very thin."

"Well," Starbuck shrugged. "I can't have a full pyramid ALL the time, now can I? Besides, I kind of like this type of mission. Short, direct, to the point, and OFF the books."

"So if we don't make it, no one will know," Apollo finished.

Starbuck was silent for a short time before answering simply.

"Yeah."

They continued through the void, each one familiarizing themselves with the different controls.

"Apollo," Starbuck called a few centars later. "Got a delta class planet on my scanner."

"I see it," Apollo replied. He fiddled with his scanner controls, checking different bandwidths. "No sign of the Cylon Base Ship."

"Well," Starbuck replied. "We're still a long way out."

Apollo nodded. "Okay," he thought. "So far, so good."

"Stay sharp," he finally said. "No one said that Base Ship HAD to be in orbit of that planet. She may not even be in this sector."

"Are you sure, or are you trying to convince yourself?" Starbuck retorted.

Apollo sighed. "Both."

Backis watched Athena as she moved steadily closer to the guarded perimeter. Athena crouched near a small cluster of moss covered rocks.

"That's close enough," Backis whispered nervously. He watched as Athena peeked cautiously out from her concealment, watching the newly constructed gray Centurions as they walked their posts.

Backis watched her body language, knowing in advance what his partner had in mind.

"No," he whispered. "You don't need to move clo â€“" He winced in anticipation of disaster as Athena crept stealthily from one pile of cover and over to another.

Reluctantly, Backis watched Athena just miss being seen by another of the gray roving sentinels.

He watched her eyes as they scanned the darkness, measuring distances and timing.

Backis knew she was contemplating a mad dash to the first temporary

structure. A dash that was out in the open for at least thirty to forty metrons.

"Oh, no," Backis said. "You're not that crazy. No one in their right mind is that crazy."

Athena waited until several sentries had passed by her, then she gripped her rifle, checked both directions, and vaulted from cover. Backis heard the whine of fear escaping his lips as he watched her moving across the open space. She seemed to be moving slower than she actually was. When she vanished around the shadowed corner of the building, he lost sight of her. A few microns later, she poked her head out again, and stared up to where Backis hid. He saw the smile on her face, and then she gave a half wave and vanished from sight.

Backis let the binoculars drop from his eyes, breathing heavily.

"I thought her flying scared the pogees out of me," he muttered.

Athena crouched low, her back against the plasteele wall of the building. Her heart pounded in her chest as she looked about. She thought immediately about going back, and turned around, only to see the sentries pacing by again. She began moving back, deeper into the complex and froze as several more centurions strode across the open yard between the processing center and the cave opening. She felt the vibration of the building behind her as machinery broke down the components of the derelict ships, processing them into new components.

"You are so stupid," she thought to herself as she crouched in the shadows. "What in Hades are you doing here, anyway?"

She scanned the area quickly and found a small cluster of supply containers off to the side of the clearing.

Moving quickly between various pieces of ground equipment, she crept, like a shadow, towards the cover of the containers, and stopped underneath a huge ground assault vehicle.

One of the ancient wrecks sat pitifully in the mud, apparently set aside for further investigation. It seemed to Athena that it looked like a wounded bird, limping on one side with a broken wing. Taking a deep breath, she sprinted quickly to the side of the wreck, ducking underneath the bent edge of the wing. She froze there, like an extension of the darkness.

Slowly, she began to move around the ancient ship, taking in the differences and similarities between the ship before her and the fighters of the fleet.

Where the Vipers had the tri-winged configuration, these were flatter, with only one engine instead of three. It was smaller than the Viper, maybe six metrons long, with two laser emitters on either side of the fuselage, mounted into the forward edge of the wing. The canopy lay, like a discarded piece of transparent eggshell, half buried in the mud. She pulled on it and yanked it free of the shallow mire. It was more like a transparent dome than the angular tylinium reinforced canopy on the Viper and Raptor.

As she continued her quiet inspection, the sound of voices carried across the breeze to her ears. She froze as she realized the voices were heading toward her.

In a panic, she looked around for a place to conceal herself, and settled on the cockpit of the tiny craft. She climbed quickly in, feeling the ship creak and groan quietly as she squeezed herself down into the shadows. The remains of the control yoke broke off under the pressure of her weight, and she could feel the corroded and frozen remains of the flight pedals under her heels. The ship smelled of must, earth and ancient grime. The hide covering and padding of the seat was gone, leaving a slightly raised metal place that bent at the back, forming the backrest.

"..was the best specimen of all the wrecked ships?" a smooth, accented voice said. It had to be the IL Cylon! Athena gripped the handle of her rifle a little tighter.

A second, deep mechanical voice droned. "Affirmative. However, we have not yet excavated the rest of the ships."

"And the core?" The smooth voice of Shadow continued.

"The core has been removed and is in the process of being transported to the surface." The deep voice droned in reply.

"See that it is secured immediately it arrives here." Shadow instructed. "I want it transported back to the Base Ship without delay."

"By your command." The mechanical voice responded, and the two sets of footsteps slowly walked off, the sound of their feet making a slight squishing noise in the damp and muddied ground.

Athena waited a count of ten before she risked a peek out side. She saw the figures of two Cylons walking slowly away. One of them was shorter, wrapped in fire blue robes, with a swirl of white lights in the transparent dome of its head. The other was a massive, golden Centurion.

"You're suicidal, Athena," she whispered to herself. "You know that?"

Out in the open, she knew that she was a target, and that fact began to twist into panic as, everywhere she turned, she saw or sensed a Cylon threat, dangerously close to catching her.

She fought the rising fear down as she moved closer and closer towards the gaping maw of the cave.

Optimum range," Colonel Tigh barked. "We can now adequately protect the fleet while we also conduct our rescue mission."

"Thank you Colonel," Adama replied. "Execute at your discretion."

"Very well," Tigh replied from his position at the com desk. "Navigation, set new course, four, one, seven, mark three, three six. Execute at flank speed."

The navigation officer acknowledged the orders and repeated them as he input the coordinates.

"Put me on unicom, please," Adama ordered, reaching down a few microns later to take the offered microphone from Omega.

Adama stood at the monitor.

"People of the fleet, this is Commander Adama," He began. "The Galactica is temporarily leaving the fleet in order to conduct a rescue mission on a nearby planet. Our Viper Squadrons are launching at this time, and will escort you to our rendezvous point. Thank you."

Adama gave a nod of his head to Flight Officer Rigel, and she released the vipers.

"All Vipers?" Asked Tigh.

"Yes," Adama replied. "I want the Raptors to handle this one on their own."

Tigh let his gaze linger on the commander for a few more microns, but held his anxieties in check. He was too well seasoned an executive officer to question his superior in front of the crew. Any concerns he had would wait until after the fighter deployment, when he could have a more private conversation with his friend and superior.

The Galactica's massive exhaust tails seemed to flare up as the thrusters roared, propelling the ship forward into a graceful turn as it headed after the two rogue fighters.

Starbuck was busy fiddling with the various controls of his ship as he and Apollo rocketed through the void. He saw a series of letters that he did not recognize. After a few microns of not-so-careful consideration, he hit the switch.

Immediately the sound of an alarm blared in the cockpit, as well as a slightly fuzzy female voice began to repeat "Missile Armed!"

In a panic, Starbuck began slapping cutoffs wildly before the voice cancelled with a "Missile Disarmed" message. In the process he had also switched off his scanners, running lights, marker beacon and a few other components. He looked over at Apollo, who stared back through his own canopy at him with a mixture of concern and annoyance on his face.

Starbuck saw his mouth moving, and realized he had also inadvertently shut off his com system. Quickly he hit the switch.

"â€œ|ou alright over there?" Apollo's voice faded in.

Starbuck gave a nervous shrug and nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why?

"Because the only way I know you're next to me is your engine glow," Apollo replied knowingly.

"Hmm?" Starbuck replied, and then he took in his surroundings again.

"Oh, sorry."

One by one, the various systems came back up, and Apollo saw the marker lights illuminate again, while his scanner, once again recognized the other ship as more than an unknown anomaly.

Apollo shook his head. "You were playing, weren't you?" he asked.

"No," Starbuck replied a bit defensively. "I knew exactly what I was doing."

Apollo smiled in spite of himself. One aspect of his friend he knew would never change, was his child like curiosity.

"Of course you did," Apollo remarked.

Backis watched nervously, his eyes scanning the complex below through the micro binoculars. He had counted out five centons sine he had lost track of Athena. He bit his own lip unconsciously as he panned back and forth.

"Where the blazes are you," he whispered. He had seen her by the derelict fighter, and then he had seen the two cylons, one gold, and the command Cylon in his fire blue robes.

On reflex alone, Backis had snatched up his rifle and sighted the two figures as they approached the wrecked ship. The two had stood there, apparently inspecting the tiny craft. They gave no indication that they had found Athena. No perimeter lights burst to life, no alarm was sounded. Backis knew that it would have been a long, very long, shot. He also knew that if he didn't take the shot, Athena would be finished. By giving the Cylons two targets, as well as a perimeter threat, it could increase her chances o escaping amidst the confusion.

His finger rested on the trigger as he watched the tiny figures until they slowly began to move away from the ship, heading back around one of the pre-fab buildings. A few microns later, the shadowy form of Athena moved stealthily away from the ship, towards the pile of supply cartons stacked off to one side. He breathed a sigh of relief as he let the rifle fall back to the soft earth and scooped up the binoculars. Athena looked warily about before she sprinted to her next place of concealment, along side the massive hauling machine. Her eyes moved from building to building and then to the open maw of the cave.

"Don't you fracking do it," Backis muttered, his teeth grinding. "Don't even think abou-" He stopped as she darted into the cave and vanished from sight.

"FRACK!" He hissed as loud as he dared.

Another movement caught his attention, and he panned the glasses in that direction to see the blue robed Cylon step from around the building. Next to him, the massive bulk of the gold Centurion also strode from the shadows. Both of them were watching the entrance of the cave. The Command Cylon made a few gestures and then turned and departed. The gold Centurion stood still for a few more microns, and then began walking towards the cave.

"Frack!" Backis said again, dropping the binoculars and raising the rifle again. "No, no, no, no, no, " he bit back a more colorful curse.

The golden Centurion continued forward, and stopped at the cave entrance, waiting.

As Backis watched, his heart sinking, he saw shadows moving from within the dimly lit cave, and then several silver centurions came marching out carrying a large circular cylinder, draped in a tan cloth. Backis was smart enough to realize what they had.

He grabbed the binoculars back and zoomed in on the object. From the front corner, he could see the material of the component and he gasped.

"That looks like a colonial computer core," he thought. He looked back over at the golden centurion. Instead of following the laborers, the gold one turned its helmeted head back towards the dark cave entrance and watched. Then it took two steps and vanished inside before Backis could, once again, grab his rifle and fire.

"There!" Starbuck exclaimed as he flipped through the various channels. "One Cylon Base Ship, in low orbit."

"I see it," replied Apollo. "Just coming around with the planet's rotation." He studied the scanned for a micron. "They're in synchronous orbit," he finally said. "That means they're protecting something on the surface."

Starbuck took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling the beginnings of an adrenaline surge.

"So," he asked. "How do you want to do this?"

Apollo hit several switches, setting up to transmit. "I'm going to send a short pulse message to the survival beacon." He said. "See if I can get it to respond."

"And then?" Starbuck asked.

"We'll see."

He sent the short signal, requesting an information dump from the indestructible pod. A few microns later, a confirmation signal returned and then the monitor showed the dump in progress. Once the indicator was complete, Apollo hit the appropriate switch, and the information on his scanner was replaced with the image of a man, leaning down in front of the lens, staring back at him, his hair a bit disheveled and his uniform showing the dirt and tears of hasty travel.

"Galactica," The Colonial Warrior said. "This is Lieutenant Backis of the Black Raptor squadron. We went extra vehicular and reached surface in one piece. No serious injuries to report. Will switch transponder on every three centars until you signal other instructions."

Backis turned his head, and Apollo saw the form of Athena lying on

the ground, unconscious. Then the pale eyes came back to the screen. "Do me a favor. Don't take too long to get here."

The image winked out, and was replaced with a second one. This time, Apollo gave a short laugh of relief as Athena stared out at him from the monitor. Her hair was stringy and her uniform was dirty and torn in a few places, but she was alive.

"Galactica," she began. "I've done all I can to boost the signal of this thing, but I don't know if you're receiving our signals. The Cylons landed on the surface here about eight centars ago and began setting up some sort of mining operation. I think our attack on them did more damage than we were led to believe and right now, they're scrambling for raw materials to conduct repairs." She paused for a few microns. "We'll be maintaining surveillance on the site until you arrive. The special crypt sequence included in this transmission will allow secured communications between our position here, and any ships in orbit." Then she paused again. "Get here as quickly as you can. They're short on troops right now, so they aren't sending patrols out to try and capture us, however, at the rate they're going, they won't be short handed for very long." The image winked out again and changed into a third image. One that seemed familiar to Apollo. He stared at it as the lens of the transponder was turned to take in the tiny closed space. When the image finally stopped, Apollo's eyes went wide as he realized that he was staring at the interior of a colonial shuttlecraft.

Backis's voice came over the speakers.

"We discovered this place when we were attempting to locate a safe base of operations." He said. "I do not know what era this shuttle is from, but after clearing out the vegetation surrounding it, wellâ€|"

Then Backis stepped in front of the camera and knelt down, his face staring out at Apollo again.

"We found the remains of the pilot, who appears to have died in the crash, lord knows how long ago. Amidst the wreckage, I was able to find two insignia pins, but I cannot make out which ship they are from, or how old they might be." He stood and then held his hand in front of the lens. In the palm of his hand were two, dirt encrusted pins.

"Nagon," Backis continued. "This is for you. If we don't get the originals to you, then you should be able to pull it out of this imagery with the computer."

Backis knelt down in front of the lens again.

"The Cylon base is growing fast guys." He swallowed. "I think part of the reason is because they've been pulling refined material out of their little hole. Athena and I saw them yank several ancient fighter class ships out of the mining shaft they blasted. Lords only know what else is in that hill."

The image winked out and a series of numbers scrolled across the screen, loading into the Raptors communications system.

"Did I hear all that right?" Starbuck asked.

"You heard it," Apollo replied. "I think it's time for us to break our silence. I'm sending these scans back to the Galactica along with a message of my own."

"Okay," Starbuck said. "You're the Captain."

"In the mean time," Apollo continued. "Follow me in. We'll come across the night side with the planet between us and that Base Ship."

"Will do," Starbuck replied. The two Raptors turned and fell towards the distant glowing sphere of the nearby planet.

Adama stood like a pillar of strength on the bridge. He watched his crew going through their pre combat routines quickly and efficiently, preparing his ship for battle.

"Colonel," Adama inquired over his headset. "What's our status?"

"On course and battle ready, Commander," Tigh reported crisply. "Forward scanners show no signs of Cylon Base Ship, or any attack force."

"Thank you Colonel," Adama said, and he turned to his console, keying the launch bay.

"Colonel Jodas," he said. "What is your status?"

In the launch bay, the Black Raptors sat waited with engines at idle. In the command center of the bay, Jodas hit a switch.

"Give the word, Commander," he said. "My kids are ready to fly and itching for a good scrap."

"Thank you Colonel," Adam replied with a voice tainted by a hint of amusement. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Commander," Omega said, turning to face him, one hand covering the speaker on his headset. "We're receiving a signal from the planet."

Adama stepped up next to Omega and leaned down to peer over the flight officer's shoulder.

Together, they watched the three feeds from the survival pod of Athena's ship, and then, a dark screen replaced the image.

"This is Captain Apollo," his son's voice rang out. "These scans were received while we approached the planet during a rescue attempt. Currently, there is a Single Base Ship in orbit of the planet in the Omega Sector. Starbuck and I are about to attempt to land and recover our missing people." There was a silence for a few microns. "It might be good for whoever gets this to offer up a prayer or two." The hiss snapped off, and the series of numbers for the encryption code scrolled across the screen before the open channel was established.

Adama felt as if his heart were about to burst. The sound of his son's voice had been different somehow. A harder, grimmer edge had

come from it, almost as if he was not expecting to survive the attempt.

"May the blessings of the Lords of Kobol go with you, my son," he whispered. Then he turned back to Omega.

"Relay that encryption sequence to the rest of the fighters in the bay."

"Yes Commander," Omega replied as he began entering the commands.

Adama keyed the mic on his headset. "Tigh, I want a concentrated scan of the Omega sector, and full tactical display."

"Yes sir," Tigh replied.

"And get me more speed," Adama finished sharply.

"The engines haven't been pushed like this since the incident on Terra," Tigh began. "We don't want to blow an energizer."

"No excuses, Colonel," Adama said, more sharply than he intended. "Push the Galactica for all she's worth!"

"Yes sir," Tigh replied.

A tremor ran through the deck plates as the Galactica began to increase her speed even more. The ship gave a deep, metallic groan as the stresses increased but she held together and stabilized after a few microns. Adama let a proud smile momentarily flash across his lips.

"Are we close enough to release the Raptors?" he asked Rigel.

"In twelve centons, Commander," Rigel replied quickly.

The good thing, Shadow mused, as his shuttle landed back on the base ship, was that he had nearly replaced all the fighters he had lost in the previous skirmishes with the Colonials. The bad thing was that most of his pilots were back down on the surface, still supporting the newly manufactured groups of centurions that slowly and steadily swelled the ranks of his war machine. As an afterthought, he suddenly realized that he had made a grievous error in judgement. He should have allowed the production of both fighters and crews to be simultaneous. Here he was with a fleet of fighters, and no one to fly them.

He exited the shuttle and went to the control center.

"Centurion," he said as he entered the chamber. "Have engineering begin to retrieve any useful data from the computer core we just brought aboard. All information to be transferred directly to my chamber."

"By your command," the silver centurion droned in response.

Shadow withdrew to his darkened chambers for some much needed peace and quiet.

Athena crept along the rough-hewn passage, ducking into the shadows whenever a threat presented itself. The cave dead ended at a turn, and beyond thatâ€¦

Her mouth fell open as she gazed into the gaping cavern of a Battlestar's landing bay. The garish yellow work lights that the cylons had strung about, gave the entire scene a macabre, skeletal look. She could see the bends and breaks in the superstructure where the ship had collapsed under the pressure of its own massive bulk. The rocky earth beyond looking like brown and white slashes in the skin of the giant ship.

Fighting to keep her wits about her, she crossed the threshold into the bay and scurried into the shadows at the corner of the structure. Only when she was safely tucked away in the darkness did she allow herself to be awed by what she saw. The entire bay lay, slightly bowed but mostly intact. Off to her side she could recognize the loading platforms of the launch tubes, and across the way she could see the opening for the ascender, which led to the other levels of the ship. The Cylons had rigged a temporary lift in place of the decrepit lift car sitting at the bottom.

She was just getting ready to move again when the golden centurion from outside stepped into view, his head turning from left to right.

"Human," it droned. "You have been observed. You have twenty microns to surrender."

Athena lowered her rifle and took aim. At least ten more centurions, most of them a dull gray in color, came into view as the golden centurion stepped forward.

"Ten microns!" The golden one counted out. One of the gray centurions turned its red sensor eye in her direction, and she saw it freeze in place, locked onto her.

"Halt!" it called out, instantly raising its weapon to fire. In the same micron the rest of the phalanx raised their weapons.

The golden one turned and also found her in the shadows.

"Five microns!" he intoned. His own weapon also rose.

Athena froze as those final microns dragged out.

"Starbuck would have something clever up his sleeve about now," she thought. Her eyes darted between the gold centurion and its silver and gray minions. Then they flicked down to her weapon. In those few precious microns, an idea came to her.

"Alright!" She called out, trying desperately to suppress the quaver in her voice. She raised the weapon into the air in surrender, and at the same time, quickly removed and reinserted the power cell. But she inserted it backwards. She began to tick the microns off in her mind. In about a centon, the weapons capacitor bank would overload, and the weapon would explode like a solonite grenade.

"Alright," she said more softly. "I surrender." She hoped desperately that the Cylons would not simply decide to burn her down where she

stood. Ten microns passed.

"Come forward," the golden centurion commanded. She did so, slower than usual. Another fifteen microns passed.

The centurion ordered her to turn around and kneel on the ground. She complied and burned away another twenty-five microns in the process. Fifty microns left.

"Take her weapons," the golden centurion commanded. Her pistol was yanked from her hip, and then the massive gloved hand closed on the rifle. She held onto it, seeming to be reluctant to relinquish it, and then let it be taken as a second hand smacked her forward to the ground. Another fifteen microns gone.

"Thirty-five," she thought as she slowly got up, her hair hanging in her face as she looked up at the group. She forced herself not to smile as the booby-trapped centurion stood center mass in the group.

"On your feet," The gold centurion commanded.

Slowly, Athena moved to a crouch, her eyes locked on the golden Cylon as she stood.

The Golden Cylon shoved her out of the bay and into the rough-hewn tunnel. She moved along obediently until the count reached five, and then she darted around the corner. Athena dove, face first into the cool, earth as the explosion took out the majority of her centurion escort. The rest were buried in the small avalanche of falling stone from the ceiling.

Athena covered her head as rocks and dirt fell from the ceiling above. When the rumbling was over, she slowly looked up, dirt and stone sloughing off of her. She looked behind her and saw several hands and feet protruding from the pile of debris.

Her entire body ached from the pummeling of stones on her back and legs.

Ignoring the pain, Athena scrambled back over the pile and slid down back into the bay of the ship. She darted back into the shadows as several more centurions came running toward the explosion and began to dig through the debris.

One of the centurion's rifles had landed in the corner. After a quick check, she found it to still be in working order. She checked the charge and then began moving quickly down the length of the bay.

Backis was beside himself with anxiety. He watched in horror as the golden centurion followed Athena into the cave, and then, not five centons later, the muffled thump of an explosion.

"Frack!" he hissed. "Frack! Frack! Frack!"

He let his head drop to the grassy earth, smelling its musty scent. He bit back tears, and quickly got to his feet, heading back to their shelter. Once the sun had set on the next day, it was his turn to go in.

It took a few centons before he saw the flashing indicator on the transponders glow panel. When he knelt down in front of it, the words "link established" flashed on the little screen. Quickly he opened the channel.

"This is Lieutenant Backis," he said. "Is anyone receiving this signal?"

"Backis," an unfamiliar voice answered. "How are you two doing down there?"

His eyes widened as recognition dawned on his face.

"Starbuck?" He asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Getting ready to come down and pick you two up," Starbuck replied evenly.

"You're nuts for bringing a shuttle out here alone!" Backis replied.

"Well, we aren't exactly in a shuttle," Starbuck replied. "Apollo and I sort of borrowed a couple of your Raptors. We figure that we'll land where you tell us. Apollo will jump in with me, while Athena and you take the other one."

"Athenaâ€¦" Backis started, and then he stopped.

"What is it?" Another voice came in. It was Apollo.

Backis swallowed hard. "I think Athena's deadâ€¦" his voice trailed off.

For a long time, both Starbuck and Apollo were silent.

Apollo felt as if someone had just torn him wide open. First, his younger brother, Zac, was killed when he couldn't get back to him fast enough. Now Athena, dead because he couldn't get to her until it was too late.

"Dead?" He stammered, his voice sounding hollow in his own ears. "Wh-what happened?"

His eyes drifted to the Raptor next to him, and saw Starbuck looking back, his own eyes wide in shock.

"Well," Backis started. "We found something amazing down here. I'm talking to you from the passenger compartment of an ancient colonial shuttle. Anyway, we set up a post to observe the Cylon operation here, and Athena saw them pulling several old ships from the mineshaft they had dug. She went down to try and find what the Cylons had gotten their hands on. She went in about ten centons ago. Then there was a muffled explosion â€" I think â€" andâ€¦" again his voice dropped off.

Apollo's eyes squeezed shut as the emotions crashed over him in a wave. He felt his heart slamming in his chest. The grief was suddenly replaced by the frustration that he had now failed; both times a family member was in trouble. Frustration and rage.

"Backis," he said with a cold growl in his voice. "Give us the nearest landing field. We're coming in!"

"Coordinates transferred," Backis replied a few microns later.

"Uh, Apollo?" Starbuck said. "Shouldn't we hold off until â€“" he didn't finish as Apollo pitched his Raptor onto its side and dove for the atmosphere.

"Apollo!"

Starbuck matched his friends maneuver and followed as they descended towards the planet.

Adama stood on the bridge. He could feel all eyes upon him as the cross talk between his only surviving child and the stranded warrior on the surface, transpired. He felt their sympathy and cold rage as he stood there. Many on the bridge had worked closely with Athena, and a few even considered her a friend. Now they had lost one of their own.

Biting back the fury that boiled in him, Adama spoke through clenched teeth.

"Tigh," he said. "Bring the Galactica in straight at the Base Ship. All forward batteries stand by to fire."

"Yes, sir," Tigh replied, his own voice tight and more fiery than usual.

A few sounds traveled across the bridge. The Galactica was beyond a rescue mission now. She was on a mission of vengeance.

"Commander," the silver centurion called over the monitor in Shadow's chamber. "Scanners indicate two ships penetrating the atmosphere."

"Indeed?" Shadow said, stepping up to the monitor. "Have you identified the intruders?"

"Profile matches previously unknown colonial design," The silver centurion replied dutifully. "Long range scanners have also picked up an approaching Battlestar."

"The Galactica?" Shadow said in surprise. "Coming here?"

"Apparently," the centurion replied.

Shadow thought for a micron. His worst fear was beginning to manifest. A colonial Battlestar, wounded and short on ships, could still defeat his ship in close combat, and he knew it. He needed time to plan. He needed a miracle.

He glanced over at the monitor which showed the detail scan of the information stored in the ancient Colonial computer core and watched the spotty information scroll by, and in those long sequences of seemingly random numbers, he found that miracle.

Shadow touched a switch on his console. "Kadal. Return to the ship at once."

No response.

"Kadal?" Shadow repeated. "Are you receiving?"

A single line flashed onto his monitor.

"UNIT OFFLINE"

Quickly, Kadal switched frequencies and contacted the communications station at the refinery, only to discover that a subterranean explosion had cut off access to the mine works and the underground wreck. It had also deactivated several centurions.

Shadow let a sigh escape his audio processor.

"Those little daggits," he said. Then he turned back to the monitor. "You're garrison is recalled, effective immediately. Transport all active centurions and equipment aboard the Base Ship without delay."

"By your command," the centurion below droned, and the image went dark.

Athena was part way down the length of the bay when a sound caught her attention. It was a grating sound of stone upon stone. She turned back and watched in horror as the dented and maimed figure of the golden centurion pulled itself from the pile of rubble. The red sensor eye flickered unsteadily as it moved back and forth in the dented, misshapen helmet. The smooth shining surface of the armor was dented and punctured in several places. Smoke poured from several gaps in the flexsteel covering of the body, and she could hear the arcing and popping of crossed circuits from inside the body.

The flickering sensor eye locked on Athena and froze.

In a popping, faltering voice, it spoke.

"KiiiiiiillLlllâ€|..hUâ€| .maNnnN!"

It began moving towards her. She raised her rifle and took aim. The weapon fizzled and popped as a single weak bolt bounced harmlessly against the command Centurions heavier, if bashed armor plates. It continued inexorably towards her.

"KillllllLl Hu..maNnnnnâ€| "

Athena turned and fled, heading deeper into the depths of the buried ship. The lights flicked in the network of corridors as the power being fed to them fluctuated unsteadily. Apparently, her exploding gun trick had done more damage than she thought. If the corridors and chambers of the ship were plunged into darkness, she would be helpless.

She darted down the corridor and headed into the ancient Life Center.

Ducking behind one of the overturned, and dust covered support chambers, she inspected the weapon. The pulse capacitor was damaged

beyond repair, making the weapon effectively useless, except as a club.

"That won't do much to you," she thought, referring to the golden behemoth on her trail.

A sharp noise caught her attention and she froze, her heart pounding in her chest. Then she heard the tonal noise of the Cylon's sensor eye. It was accompanied by a slight fizzling and popping noise.

With a screech of metal, the ancient chamber was wrenched from the floor. Kadal raised the metallic cylinder over his head, and brought it crashing down at the girl on the floor.

Athena rolled away as the chamber slammed into the metal floor beside her. She scrambled on all fours before finally getting her feet under her and sprinting down the corridor, back towards the landing bay. She could hear the relentless thud of Kadal's booted feet as he came after her. A massive hand caught her between the shoulder blades and sent her skidding forward until she slammed against the bulkhead.

Gloved hands reached down and grabbed her shoulders, tossing her back down the corridor, where she landed in a heap with a sickening thump.

The good thing was the fact that she didn't feel like any bones had broken in that second landing. The bad thing was that she was still dizzy from her headlong slide into the bulkhead, and now, she was having trouble getting the air back into her lungs.

She forced her aching body to move, looking up in time to see the battered golden form stop before her. One massive leg went back and she felt the air blasted from her again as she went skidding a good distance down the corridor, a hoarse cry escaping her lips as the pain lanced through her midsection.

"If you stay down," she thought, gasping. "You'll die here."

She forced her feet under her and stumbled against the wall as the golden centurion came after her again. Athena looked past the Cylon at the open hatch. If she wanted to get out, she would have to get past it. The Red Sensor light flickered as it centered in the dark visor, fixing on her.

"KiiIIiIiilll!..HuuuuuuMmMmAAAnnNnn!" it droned in a static filled voice.

She stumbled a few steps back away from the thing, and then did the only thing she could think of. She charged.

The Cylon caught her at full speed and simply flipped her over, her back scraping against the ceiling with a shredding sound as her jacket tore on the rough surface. She cartwheeled wildly before impacting the floor again.

A drop of sweat, or blood, trickled into her eye as she fought to rise. Her route was open. She pulled herself up to her feet, forcing her eyes to focus, and stumbled for the hatchway.

The Cylon Grabbed her again, but this time, she spun wildly, slipping out of her ruined coat, she banged her knee hard on the floor as she stumbled forward, and then she half ran, half limped toward the hatch. The ascender had long since ceased working, but the ladder was sound, so she decided against the use of all rungs and let her feet slide down the outer edge of the ladder until, with a jar that momentarily locked her knees, she hit the bottom, and stumbled back away from the rotten lift car, until she fell on the ground.

The Cylon simply stepped to the edge, and jumped, landing with a loud whump on the deck, reverberating in the confined space.

With panic beginning to assert itself in her mind, Athena scrambled backwards and stumbled to her feet, running for the partially blocked entrance of the cave.

She scrambled over the rubble and fell back into the open part of the tunnel. She tripped and fell, and too her amazement, her hand closed on the barrel of her own pistol. She rolled over in time to see Kadal begin clawing its way after her. She took aim, fired, and let out a hiss as the shot went wide of its target.

Chunks of rock from the ceiling hit the floor next to her. Fearful of the possibility that the cave might collapse on top of her, she rolled over and ran towards the growing bright light of dawn, and the outside.

"Apollo," Starbuck called out. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

"Like the whole ground force leaving the surface," Apollo answered as he watched the line of specs that indicated ships, moving up and away from the surface. "I see it."

"My guess is that the Galactica is getting a little too close for the Cylon's comfort," Starbuck continued. "At least it'll be a short trip home."

"Yeah," Apollo answered absently.

Starbuck focused on his instruments, ignoring the growing emotions in his mind. There would be time to mourn later. "Coming up on the landing coordinates. We should be passing right over that station Backis was talking about."

The two Raptors banked slightly, heading towards the retreating Cylon convoy.

A few centons later, the silver gray dome shapes of several prefab buildings became visible, rising above the jungle canopy.

"Looks like a resource, processing facility" Starbuck chattered on.

A movement caught his attention and he craned his neck, pinning his helmet against the transparent surface of the cockpit. "What the - ?"

Down among the buildings, stumbling across the uneven field, her tan uniform dark with dirt and grime, was Athena!

"Apollo!" Starbuck called out. "Athena's right below us!"

"What!" Apollo barked. He looked around. "Where!"

"Down there!" Starbuck pointed.

Apollo leaned over to the other side of his cockpit and rolled the Raptor slightly. A few microns later, he spotted her, shuffling between two buildings. She turned and fired a shot behind her. Apollo saw the shot explode off the edge of one building, and then he saw a glint of gold through the dust as the battered form of a Cylon Centurion walked jerkily after her.

"Starbuck!" Apollo called.

"I've got a better angle," Starbuck replied. "I'll get him!"

Starbuck's Raptor rolled over and dove towards its target.

"Commander!" Omega reported. "Cylon Base Ship just coming in view from behind the planet!"

"Status?" Adama asked.

"I'm showing some power fluctuations in its energy signature. Seems that the ship is still undergoing repairs from our previous encounter." Omega replied. "I show weapons systems powered up, but there isn't nearly the concentration I'd expect from a Base Ship."

"They may be too badly damaged for a fight," Tigh said. "We could go in and finish them off."

"Or they could be baiting us," Adama countered. He keyed the com to the waiting fighters. "Colonel Jodas?"

"Yes sir!" Jodas replied from the control station in the launching bay.

"Release your squadron," Adama ordered. "Full attack."

"Aye aye, sir!" Jodas almost whooped. He keyed off the com and then keyed the Raptor's frequency.

"All right boys and girls! It's time for the party! Fire those bad boys up and hit it!"

From his cockpit, Milesar grinned. He looked to his right, and then craned his head back to see the rest of the ships.

"You heard the man," he said as he slammed his throttle forward.

Shadow watched the approaching Battlestar with what could only be described as a nervous feeling moving through his circuits. As he observed, he saw several small specs appear from within the massive landing bay. They formed into a rough X shaped formation, and moved

to a point at the front of the ship. A quick zoom and enhancement proved his fears. The colonial variants were on their way in, and he knew that his ship's odds of surviving the combined onslaught were pitifully slim at best.

Time for him to play his gamble.

"Centurion," he ordered. "Lock all weapons on the surface outpost. Fire on my command only."

"By your command," the silver centurion replied.

Shadow shifted his monitor view to an enhanced scan of the abandoned outpost. Two Colonial ships were moving to an aggressive position, preparing to strafe the field. Then he saw a subtle orange flash. He zoomed in on the image and saw the dented and battered form of his second in command moving after one of those human survivors.

"Kadal?" he said out loud in amazement. Judging by the movements and damage to his counterpart. Kadal was functioning on his base line programming, attempting to kill any human in his path. Suddenly, the earth around Kadal erupted into flames as brilliant red bolts shattered Kadal and a large patch of surrounding soil. When the smoke cleared, all that remained of Kadal were shards of hot glowing golden metal.

He stood taller, and watched as the cross hairs on the targeting computer locked on the spot central to the compound, and the two colonial ships now landing in his landing field.

"Open a channel," Shadow ordered. "Hail the Galactica."

"By your command." The Centurion droned.

"Commander?" Omega said as his hand reached up to press against the speaker of his headset. "You are being hailed by the Cylon ship."

"I am?" Adama's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Yes sir," Omega replied. "By name."

Adama looked at Tigh, who could only shrug slightly and shake his head.

"Connect that signal here," Adama ordered.

A few microns later, the swirling lights and bouncing sensors of Shadow's face appeared on the monitor.

"Commander Adama," he cooed pleasantly. "How very pleasant to see you again, so soon."

"What is the reason for this call, Shadow?" Adama asked. "Do you wish to surrender?"

"Hardly, Adama," Shadow said pleasantly. "I felt that I should contact you, and suggest that you tell those nasty little fighters of yours to break off before something very unpleasant occurs."

"Such as?" Adama continued, one gray eyebrow rising slightly.

"Doubtless you have received the telemetry reports on our little outpost on the planet below," Shadow said. "We have already completed our tasks there, and withdrawn to the ship. As Cylon directives dictate, we were preparing to obliterate the outpost as a matter of security. I have temporarily postponed this directive until I spoke with you."

"How very considerate," Adama replied.

"Currently, there are two of your ships, and four of your people on the surface below," Shadow continued. The image winked out, replaced by an overhead view of a section of the planet surface. It zoomed and enhanced until Adama saw, quite clearly, the figures of Starbuck, his son Apollo, Backis, and Athena!

"She's alive!" his mind raced at the thought, and his heart skipped a few beats.

Then a series of targeting cross hairs centered on the key structures of the facility, with four six of them centering on the ships and each individual person.

"As you can see," Shadows voice continued. "I need not obliterate the outpost to obliterate your people. In fact, I will give you thirty microns to decide whether or not they live, or you watch them vaporize."

"What do you want?" Adama said after a long pause.

The image winked out.

"I wish to trade with you, human," Shadow said. Then his eyes drifted down to another monitor on his console. "But not until you withdraw your fighters. As you can see, I have held my own ships back, as a gesture of good will."

Adama fought to keep from scoffing at his adversary, but he turned and nodded to Colonel Tigh.

"Recall the flight crews," Tigh ordered. Then he listened for a micron or two and nodded.

"Thank you, Adama," Shadow said as he watched the fighters turn away and head back toward the Galactica. They did not land, but took up station near the front of the ship, ready to charge at a microns notice.

"Well?" Adama asked, trying desperately to calm his racing heart.

"I want your word of honor that your ship, or its fighters will NOT hinder our peaceful withdrawal from this system." Shadow said. It sounded more like an order instead of a request. "In return we will leave the facilities on the planet intact for your use. Both as a repair facility, or any other use you may have for it."

"You'd take my word?" Adama asked, mildly surprised.

"I have learned through some association, that the word of some humans, can be as binding as Cylon chains. I feel that you may be such a man. Am I mistaken?"

Adama did not reply, but Shadow seemed to read his mind.

"Excellent." He said. "As I surmised."

Adama decided to take his enemy's measure.

"What is to stop me from destroying you the micron you are out of weapons range of the planet?"

"Ah," Shadow replied without hesitation. "That will be the second part of our bargain. I have something else that you want very much."

"And that is?" Adama asked.

With an almost nonchalant air, Shadow said, "The precise coordinates of the planet Earth."

Athena rolled over and looked up as the cloud of flame and debris that had been a golden Cylon settled back to the ground. Through the smoke, she could see the familiar black shape of a Raptor. The sound of a second Raptor came from the nearby landing field. She looked and saw the powerful machine sliding to a stop on its landing skids.

"Yes!" She cried out, rolling over and getting to her feet. She stopped short when the hatch of the first Raptor opened and her older brother began climbing out of the cockpit.

"Apollo?" She cried out. "What are you doing here?" She ran towards him, embracing him as he landed on the ground.

Apollo held that embrace for a long time. She could feel a kind of desperation in his grasp.

"Hey," she said. She looked at him and saw the mix of relief and pain.

"I'm okay, big brother," she said. "I just want to get out of here."

Apollo swallowed his emotions down and became, again, the Colonial Captain.

"As soon as Starbuck gets down here, I'll jump in with him. You and Backis take this one."

"Starbuck?" Athena and Backis said at the same time as Athena's R.O. came jogging up.

Starbucks raptor made a slightly awkward landing, slowing to a stop and rolling up next to the other black ship.

"Hey everyone!" He called from the open cockpit. "I hate to break up the family reunion, but there IS a Cylon Base Ship hovering over our

heads!"

"He's right," Apollo replied, pulling his helmet back on. "Get in and get airborne. The spare helmets are in the storage compartment."

With that he jogged over to Starbucks waiting ship and began climbing in.

The four of them exchanged looks from their ships as they rolled to a suitable takeoff position.

"Go! Go!" Starbuck shouted from his ship as Apollo situated himself in the rear seat.

Athena let her smile grow as she throttled the ship up and sped through the center of the complex and rose toward the sky. She looked down and behind towards the second ship as Starbuck maneuvered to takeoff position. A strange shape caught her attention and she instinctively banked in the direction.

"What's s?" Backis asked.

"Athena!" Starbuck called. "Wait up!"

"Hurry up!" Athena shot back more sharply than she intended. She banked the Raptor in a lazy turn and continued climbing.

What was mistaken as rolling, foliage covered hills, down on the ground, was in actuality a long, ancient furrow that ended with a massive roughly circular swatch of land.

"Give me an opinion," she asked Backis. "Does that look like natural topography?"

Backis squinted his eyes and stared down at the anomaly.

"That isn't natural," he finally said. "If it were anything, I'd say it looked like an old impact crater."

Starbuck and Apollo's Raptor finally tucked in next to Athena.

"Athena?" Starbuck said. "What are you doing?"

"Look down there, guys," Athena said. "You tell me what you see?"

"Sis," Apollo said. "That Base Ship could start shooting any micron. We have to leave. Now!"

"But—" Athena protested.

"Now, Athena!" Apollo cut her off.

The two Raptors turned and began to climb for orbit.

Adama stared at the monitor, his heart, which was racing before at the sight of his daughter, now thundered in his ears.

"You have the location of Earth?" he asked, trying unsuccessfully to hide the dryness that had suddenly appeared in his mouth.

"That's impossible!" Tigh hissed.

"No," Shadow replied. "It is true, Colonel." He stepped back, out of the line of sight for the monitor, and revealed a large, roughly cylindrical object. Cables ran to various points on the thing, and centurions moved about, adjusting or removing ancient components.

"I believe you will recognize this object." Shadow continued. "It is a Mark three, colonial computer core. Which, if memory serves, was the standard computer mainframe for the Titan class Battlestar, yes?"

Adama leaned back and whispered quickly. "We need an historical expert here, now!"

Tigh nodded and stepped away, his lips moving quickly behind the tiny microphone on his headset.

"Within the core, we found data regarding the travels of the ship, and nearly complete records of the systems it ventured through." Shadow finished. "This ship's systems identified it as the Prometheus."

"I see," Adama said. He forced his nervousness down.

"Commander," Omega whispered. "Two ships outbound from the planet. Raptor class ships. They should break orbit in five centons."

Adama gave a subtle nod. At the same moment, Tigh's voice came over his headset.

"Commander. Switch the com frequency over to the Black Raptors. Lieutenant Nagon needs to hear what's going on. Omega, feed video scans to Raptor three."

Omega did as instructed. After a few microns, Nagon's voice came over Adama's headset.

"Commander?" He said quietly. "I don't know where he got that core, but it LOOKS genuine. I read through the transcript of your conversation. He has the class of ship correct as well, and there is historical data that mentions a Titan Class Battlestar called the Prometheus. It isn't mentioned prominently, but it is there."

Adama gave another subtle nod.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Tigh acknowledged. "Continue to monitor this channel."

"Yes, sir."

"Even if I were to believe your claim," Adama said. "I would require proof that the core is genuine."

"Check with the warriors coming up from the surface, Commander," Shadow said evenly. "One of them actually entered the wreck of the ship."

Shadow stepped back into view. "We will begin our withdrawal at this time. Once we are clear of your weapons, I will jettison the core and transmit the coordinates to you on a secure channel. Do I have your word?"

Adama looked over to Omega who shook his head, indicating that the two ships were not yet out of danger.

"I'm going to do a flash pass," Athena said suddenly.

"What?" Apollo and Starbuck both replied in surprise.

"I'll be back in a centon," Athena finished. Her ship flipped over on its back and dove back towards the surface.

"Athena!" Apollo cried out. "Get your tail back up here! Now!"

Athena ignored him.

"Back," she said quickly. "Fire up the scanners, high res, across the spectrum."

"Maybe we should think about this, boss," Backis said, his voice vibrating with the shaking of the ship.

"Don't make me climb back there Backis!" Athena retorted.

"Okay, okay," Backis conceded. His fingers moved across the keyboard, then he looked up and saw that they were aiming for the patch of terrain that had been scarred by an ancient impact.

"Scan for complex alloys," Athena continued. She winced as Apollo and Starbuck started yelling at her through the helmet speakers, and finally cut the connection. "Refined metals and compounds, trace elements, the works."

"Got it." Backis replied. "Go now!"

Athena hit the turbos and the ship vaulted forward, flashing over the site along the line of the deep ravine. It shot past the Cylon complex like a projectile and then vaulted skyward.

"Tell me you got everything!" Athena said loudly over the roaring engines.

"It's compiling!" Backis replied. "The Galactica is in system, not even a hectare away! We could bounce the signal over to her!"

"Do it!" Athena answered. She reached over and reactivated her com.

"Starbuck! I've got what I need! Head back to the Galactica!"

"As soon as you get your astrums back up here with us!" Apollo's angry voice replied.

At the same micron, her ship shot past Starbuck's its aft section blazing blue/white fire.

"You two coming?" Athena asked as she pulled away.

Apollo cursed, while Starbuck smiled. "Hang on, buddy." He said and he pulled back on the stick, hitting the turbo button. Instantly, the two of them were pinned to the seats as their ship followed Athena's. Starbuck yowled with exhilaration.

The sky paled, and the clouds vanished, revealing the pinpoint of stars as the two ships left the planet heading into space.

"Time's up, human," Shadow said. "I have held off from attacking your two fighters, but you must make your decision now!"

Omega leaned over. "They're clear of the planet, on a return arc for the Galactica."

"Jettison the core now, as an act of good will," Adama said. "You will have the time you need to pull back while our shuttle crews retrieve it. Once that is done, you may transmit the coordinates as soon as you are clear of our weapons."

"And your fighter craft?" Shadow asked.

"They will return to the Galactica once they confirm that the core has been released." Adama finished.

Shadow thought for a micron.

"Very well," he said at last. "We will jettison the core in twelve centons."

Adama shook his head. "Five." He said, holding up his hand.

"It will be difficult," Shadow replied. "But it will be done. I will contact you once the core has been expelled." The image faded out.

Colonel Jodas strode onto the bridge as Adama stepped away from the screen and seated himself in one of the chairs on the platform.

"Earth," he said. "The path to the planet Earth."

"Adama," Tigh interjected. "You don't honestly believe they'll give us that information, do you?"

"They already have, Colonel," Nagon's voice came over the speaker on his headset. Tigh had forgotten about the Raptor pilot listening in over the open com channel.

"One thing that even the Cylons would not know, is that many of the old computer cores had a manually bootable backup system, separate from the main core. Important data, like course headings, would be automatically saved in the backup mainframe. Even if we destroy that snitrad, we'll still have what we need!"

"So, we could destroy that ship," Jodas said.

Adama looked solemn. "No," he finally said.

All of his officers looked at him with total shock.

"What?" Jodas blurted out. "Begging your pardon, Commander, but that snitrad took out twenty four pilots in a cowardly ambush, then decided to hold our fate hostage with his little game here. Not to mention the agro—" he stopped as Adama turned steel eyes on him.

"As you were, Colonel," he growled. "I know, better than most, what the Cylons have done to us. Yet, as a man of honor, I gave my word. The Cylon Ship will be allowed to withdraw."

"But, Commander - ?" Jodas continued. Adama raised his hand.

"Provided, he does not attempt to transmit the information to anyone but us. I will not be responsible for the destruction of our brothers and sisters on the planet Earth. Any broad band transmissions, and I will blow that ship to oblivion."

"But you didn't tell â€œ" Tigh began and he stopped as Adama turned his eyes on his friend and smiled.

"No, I didn't, did I." He answered with an air of menace that Tigh had only seen once, in their academy days. He also remembered the destructive results. Adama, in his mid age, was much changed from the Adama of the academy, so many yahrens ago. He had had a penchant for rash, and often-brutal vengeance towards his "mechanical" enemies. Since they were not living, he was able to associate their destruction with shutting down a malfunctioning computer.

That old Adama now sat before him again, in a position of absolute, almost divine power. Like a vengeful, protective God.

"Commander!" Omega chimed in. "We're receiving a pulse scrambled feed from the two incoming Raptors."

"What?" Jodas and Adama both asked.

"Narrow beam, on the fleet com channel. Video feed." Omega's fingers danced across his keyboard and then hit several switches.

"Decoding."

In a matter of microns, the image shot past them, at a birds eye perspective of a long section of jungle.

"What the blazes was that?" Tigh asked.

"Something I came up with about thirty yahrens ago, Colonel," Jodas replied. "It's called a flash pass. You shoot past a target at full speed, setting all your monitoring equipment to the highest resolution, and then slow it down."

They all leaned over the scanner as Omega slowed the playback to a frame by frame speed. They followed the flight pattern.

"That looks like an old point of impact," said Tigh, pointing at the screen.

"Yeah," Jodas agreed. "But it wasn't a dead on hit." His brows

furrowed. "Almost like something hit at an angle, like a rock skimming water."

"A glide path," Adama said. He watched as the flight line followed the shallow crevasse. "And at the opposite end!"

They all watched as the Cylon building moved slowly by. A single piece of abandoned machinery caught their attention.

"Freeze that!" Jodas barked. Omega his the switch and the image stopped, showing several circular, dome shaped buildings, various ground equipment, packing crates, and one, amazing vehicle.

"Zoom in on that," Adama said breathlessly.

On the monitor, the image of an ancient, yet unmistakably colonial ship resolved into view.

"I'll be -" Tigh began, but his voice faded.

"She included high resolution and invasive scans in the package," Omega continued. "IR, X-Ray, Metallurgical, Seismic, and a dozen other spectrums."

"That's my girl," Both Adama and Jodas whispered at the same time, each with the same air of pride. They exchanged glances, and then a smile flashed on each of their faces as they looked back at the monitor.

Shadow slowly turned away from the monitor. He wasn't beaten yet. He would not allow himself to be bested by this Colonial Human creature. He turned to the silver centurion at his side. One benefit of losing Kadal. His former second in command would never have approved of the next set of instructions.

"Prepare a single fighter," he instructed. "Have two of your best pilots ready to launch with the coordinate information. Tell them to begin transmitting the data back to Cylon as soon as they are clear. With their fighters in a holding pattern, they will be too far away to stop the transmission."

"By your command," The silver centurion droned.

"Bring all motive units to full power, and have the electronic defense shields brought to stand-by mode. When I give the order, put all power to the drive units and ram the Galactica at full sub light speed."

The centurion turned its bouncing eye sensor on Shadow.

"That is an unapproved strategy," it droned.

"As a commissioned commander, appointed by the Imperious Leader, sworn to protect all Cylon from ANY threat at ANY cost, this strategy is the final, and most logical solution." Shadow smoothly lied.

The performance was lost on the silver drone. It merely comprehended "commander, Protect Cylon, and Imperious Leader" and interpreted them in its simplest way.

"By your command," It replied.

Shadow turned and, with a swirl of robes, withdrew. He left the command center and headed down into the deepest bowels of the lower section, to where the spare components of his army had been kept. In a separate locked compartment, he removed a large, flexsteel suit, like a bulky body suit, but armored and black. Then he removed a second unit, conical, like the top half of an egg. It was dull black and about half the size of a human head. He set the two items down and then pressed a release at his throat. The fire blue cobalt robe he wore fell to the floor with a metallic rustle and he stood there "naked".

His body was a combination of reinforced support structure, much like a human skeletal system, but uncovered where some of the major components were placed. Tiny lights flashed from the cavities in his torso, and sinewy flex fibers, a material that mimicked the movements of organic muscles were attached and exposed at the joints of his body, shining a dull lifeless gray against his polished black infrastructure. With the robes gone, his ability to move more freely gave him an almost human smoothness to his actions.

Quickly, he reached out and took hold of a molecular fastener, and then he set the first piece of flexsteel to his lower leg and foot. The machine whirred, and sparks erupted as the opaque, dull armor welded itself into place. Next came the thigh and abdominal protection, back plate and finally the chest piece. His arms and legs, were the last to be covered in the armor. Once the task was completed, he stepped away from the work station and over to a large, reflective slab of plasteen.

His body, which had been gaunt from lack of armor, was now bulked up, and the surface of his armor showed no hint of flaw or weakness. He reached for the final piece of armor, and set the oblong shape over his transparent dome, dousing the swirling lights of his neural center. His bouncing red sensor eyes stared at the reflection without emotion.

"Perfect," he said to himself. He let his arms fall to his sides and then looked about the room. Weapons. Now he needed weapons. He went to the armory and retrieved a rifle, pistol and sword from the numerous racks of weapons. The rest of the equipment he needed was on the surface below.

He removed his helmet and made his way to his own command center. Standing before the cracked and useless monitors. Only one small screen was functional. He set his helmet down on another of the cracked and blackened consoles and then hit a switch.

"Open a channel to the Galactica." He instructed. "And have the pilots I requested stand by in the launch bay."

"By your command," the answering voice droned.

Athena looked behind her as the sky faded from its uniform blue to the cold black void of space.

"Oh Frack!" Starbuck exclaimed.

"What?" Athena asked.

"I think he's a little upset about the obstacle between us and the home base." Backis piped in. "I have a Cylon Base Ship, just passing the terminator line into the night side."

"And the Galactica?" Athena asked.

"She's just beyond." Backis replied. "I'm also getting marker beacons from the rest of the Raptors. They seem to be in a holding pattern near the front of the ship."

Athena smiled and keyed her com.

"Raptor two to Galactica. Do you copy?"

Her father's voice responded almost instantly.

"Go ahead Raptor two!"

"Did you receive my little message?" Athena asked.

"Every bit of it!" Her father answered. "Maintain your position for now. Do not cross the terminator line until otherwise instructed."

"Understood," Athena replied. She looked over at the other ship besides hers. "How's your fuel, Starbuck?" she asked.

She watched as Starbuck looked around in a vain attempt to locate the appropriate panel.

"Uh, uh," he stuttered. "Oh, fine."

Athena let her eyes flick to the seat behind Starbuck, where Apollo sat.

"Apollo? How's your fuel?"

"Main tank is nearly dry," Apollo said. "But the auxiliary cell is still full."

"Back?" Athena asked.

"I started the transfer as soon as we took off. We're at nearly full capacity."

"Would you instruct the newbies, please?" Athena said, a smile on her face.

"Certainly, boss," Backis said, and then he hit his com.

Apollo looked over the myriad of controls as he tried desperately to find the switch that would begin transferring fuel from the external pod and up into the more protected internal tanks.

"Newbies, huh," he grunted.

"Gentlemen," Backis's voice came over the helmet speakers. "I understand you need gas. Captain Apollo, activate the auxiliary monitor just above your left knee!"

After a short while, Apollo watched the levels on the Raptors fuel gauge begin to rise. He sighed.

"Thanks Backis," he said.

"My pleasure, Captain," Backis replied jovially. "I didn't want to see you two crash after all the trouble you wen to for us."

Apollo smiled and looked over at the other ship as Backis gave him a friendly wave.

"Okay big brother," Athena said. "Since you're the ranking officer -"

"Now wait a centon," Starbuck cut in. "How can he give the orders if he's sitting in the back?"

"Alright," Athena said. "Then as the second in command of the Black Raptors, with more seniority on this type of aircraft, I guess that makes me the boss."

"Huh?" Starbuck said. "Now just a ce-"

"Read your regs, Starbuck," Athena quipped.

"Excuse me!" Apollo cut in. "Do I have a say in this?"

"Sure," said Backis, smiling. "Provided you can get a word in edgewise." He was silent for a couple of microns. "Let her have it Cap. She won't let you down. On my honor."

Apollo looked over at the other ship, and then at the back of Starbuck's helmet. As the senior officer, he could designate which one of them would be in command. He sighed.

"Alright Athena," he said. "We're all yours." Then he quickly disconnected the channel and leaned forward towards Starbuck. "Sorry," he finished.

"Eh.." Starbuck grumbled.

"Okay," Athena said. She looked over towards the distant shape of the Cylon ship. "I guess we sit tight, for now, but keep an eye on that ship."

"You got it, boss." Backis replied, his fingers going to work on the equipment.

Milesar looked around at the other Raptors, all hovering a few thousand metrons off the Galactica's bow. For the fourth time in fifteen centons he keyed for Core Command.

"Status?" he asked impatiently.

"Black Raptors, continue to hold," Rigel said again. Milesar could swear that the flight controller had left her station and simply programmed a recording of her voice to answer with that statement.

"Come on, Core Command," he replied. "We're burning fuel here, and accomplishing nothing!"

"Understood, Raptors," Rigel repeated. "Continue to hold."

Milesar disconnected the channel with an exaggerated flip of the switch. "Continue to hold," he repeated irritably.

"Lead, this is six," Justi's voice called. Brie's RO had a nervous tenor in her voice.

"Go, six," Milesar replied.

"I have two signatures on the scanner, from the far side of the ship. Configuration matches ours!" Justi continued.

"You think Starbuck and Apollo did it?" Brie asked.

Ensign Rega reached up and hit a com switch right behind Milesar's seat.

"Only one way to find out," he replied. Then he opened another channel. "Raptor two, and Raptor thirteen, do you copy?"

"Loud and clear," came Backis's reply. "What in the Nubian suns is going on out here?"

In most of the ships, the Black Raptor pilots let out gasps of relief. Brie actually let out a short whoop of relief. Then she keyed the com.

"The Galactica and the Cylons seem to have some sort of agreement for the micron. We're on hold until further ordered."

Nagon in Raptor Three continued. "It looks like the Cylons began a mining and refining project on the surface and ended up discovering the wreck of an ancient Battlestar down there."

"I know," Athena's voice came back. "I've been inside. For a wreck, it's remarkably intact, but buried."

"You were inside?" Nagon said, his voice filled with a mixture of envy and incredulity.

"Yup," Athena said. "And Backis has a gift for you. Hopefully they'll help identify the wreck."

"We already did," Nagon said. "Or rather, the Cylons did. It's the Prometheus."

Quickly, Nagon, Milesar, and the rest of the Raptors filled Athena in on the situation. Once the impromptu briefing was done, Athena said.

"Alright. We'll hold position here."

"Copy, Two," Milesar replied, smiling. He knew what Athena meant by "holding".

Once the conversation was over, Athena switched the com back to the

private frequency between her ship and Starbuck.

"I want us to edge closer to the Base ship, but don't make it LOOK like we're purposely getting closer." Then she spoke to Backis. "Scan the Base ship and keep it under observation. Let me know what happens with it."

> "You got it," Backis replied. Then after a few microns of working, he let out a small laugh. "Gods, it feels good to be back at work again." <p>

Athena smiled as she checked their course and heading and made an adjustment of a few degrees, slowly closing on the massive Base Ship.

Shadow stood above the monitor, he knew that the absence of his robes might be detected by the Colonial Commander but it was a risk he was forced to take. With his new protective outer shell, the flimsy robes would not fit over his larger outer shell. In fact, he was counting on it. The Silver haired human appeared on the tiny monitor.

"Ah, Commander," he began with false lightness. "I am contacting you to inform you that the core is ready to be jettisoned to you, and we are preparing to withdraw from the system. I trust our actions have met with your approval thus far?"

"They have, indeed," Adama replied warily.

"Excellent," Shadow replied. "Stand by to retrieve. Shadow out."

He disconnected the com.

"Control," he said, opening another channel. Jettison the Colonial Computer core in five centons. Thirty microns after, bring the motive units to full power and begin our run against the Galactica. Launch the fighter at the same time, keeping this ship between it and the Galactica. They will not see the fighter launch, and once our run is complete, they will not see anything at all.

Shadows audio circuits did not even hear the reply of "by your command." He was already out the door and heading elsewhere.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Backis shouted suddenly. "That big baby just started waking up!"

"What have you got?" Athena asked.

"Motive units, shields, weapons, all just came on line," Backis reported.

"They may try and attack the Galactica," Starbuck said urgently.

"It doesn't look that way," Backis replied. "They powered up, but they haven't activated any targeting systems. And their shields are one sided. Forward only."

"Defensive withdrawal?" Apollo asked.

"Maybe," said Starbuck. His voice was filled with skepticism.

"I have an object away from the Base ship!" Backis called a few

microns later. "Spherical, about two metrons in height."

"Looks like the Base ship is backing off," Starbuck said.

"Yeah," Apollo agreed. "It is. It's backing away." Then he caught a tiny flash somewhere aft of the base ship. He squinted his eyes but couldn't see it. Cursing, he began furiously hitting controls, trying to find a regular attack scanner. He found it and saw the single blip speeding away from the Base ship. He switched to form scan and grimaced. A single Cylon fighter.

"I have a Cylon Fighter pulling away fast from the Base ship!" He called out.

"What?" Athena asked.

"Galactica has begun to move forward, a shuttle just cleared the bay," Backis reported.

"Athena," Starbuck said. "I'll wager a sectons pay that Shadow is on that fighter, and he's taking the coordinates of earth straight back to the Cylon home world."

"We can't let him do that, boss!" Backis said in dismay.

Athena's eyes flicked between the spot where she assumed the fighter would be and the massive bulk of the base ship, and then she took a deep breath.

"Let's do it," she said, and the two Raptors rolled over, their turbos flaring brilliantly as they moved to pursue.

Milesar and the rest of the squadron moved into a protective sphere around the recovery shuttle as they drifted towards the floating cylindrical computer core. They had just begun to fan away from the shuttle when Athena's voice rang out.

"Raptor Two to Black Raptors. We are in pursuit of a lone Cylon fighter!"

"What?" Milesar said in surprise, then he looked up and cried out in fear. "Break! Break! Break!"

"Oh Frack!" Backis shouted. "The Base ship just reversed direction! He hit the com for the Galactica. "Core Control! Base ship is on a collision course and gaining speed!"

They were almost on the lone fighter when an explosion erupted along side them.

"I got three more fighters!" Apollo called out. "They're coming up from the surface!"

"Starbuck!" Athena called out.

"I'm on them!" Starbuck replied, and the big ship rolled over and peeled away, arcing back to confront the new threat. Athena focused on the ship ahead. A few more microns and she could shoot. She switched to missiles and held her breath.

"Here they come!" Backis shouted. "Shoot, Boss! Shoot!"

The tone came on and Athena hit the button almost simultaneously. She rolled the ship and watched two more blue torpedoes explode in the space where her ship had just been. A message scrolled across her monitor.

"TARGET DESTROYED"

"Got him!" Athena shouted as she turned to face the next attacker.

Starbuck lined up his sights on the ship in front of him and hit the button. Red streaks of light punctured the Cylon fighter and it detonated in a tremendous explosion.

"Starbuck!" Apollo shouted. "That other one is coming up fast!"

"No problem," Starbuck said lightly as he rolled the ship over in a dive. With a Viper, the maneuver would have been sufficient to break away and escape the Cylon ship, however, the Raptor moved slower and the Cylon matched the maneuver easily, firing at the black ship.

"Frack!" Starbuck bellowed and he quickly rolled the ship in the other direction. He juked the Raptor as best he could, but the enemy ship matched his moves and continued lining up for the kill.

"Athena!" Starbuck shouted. "I need help over here!"

As if in answer, a white wisp of smoke shot above and past his ship's cockpit, the missile bouncing the Raptor as it passed.

"Whoa!" Starbuck cried in alarm, then he saw the flare of an explosion illuminate his status board.

"Wow!" Apollo cried in alarm. The Cylon vaporized in a cloud of expanding gas. "Nice shot!"

"Starbuck!" Athena said. "Switch to missiles and follow me!"

"Sure," Starbuck replied, rolling over and falling into position at Athena's side. "How?"

In a frustrated voice, Athena said. "Toggle switch on the right side of the control stick!"

"Hmm?" Starbuck replied, looking down at his control. He spied the red switch, just above and in front of his thumb. "Oh, okay." He hit the switch and watched as his attack scanner changed modes, showing a real time image of the Base ship and a counter, rapidly counting down the distance to firing range.

"Hey, this is pretty neat," he said lightly.

Collision alarms wailed on the bridge as Adama stared out the viewport towards the oncoming craft.

"All back full!" he bellowed. "Fire control. Bring the missiles up

from standby to fire mode! Fire at point blank range!"

"Aye sir!" Someone replied.

"At this range, we'll be caught in the shockwave!" Tigh shouted. Then into his mic. "Get me more power to the engines!"

They could feel the shift in the Galactica as she slowed and then slowly began to move back away from the collision. Adama knew that the impact was unavoidable.

"Positive shield, now!" He shouted. "Fire missiles!"

He saw the tiny flares of light, which indicated the Raptor fighters, scattering away from the Cylon ship, and then the flare as the recovery shuttle was smashed to bits on impact with the big ship's shields.

He watched as the massive metal plate closed like a mouth over the transparent viewport. At the same micron, the guns station shouted "Missiles firing!"

"Get those fighters clear!" Adama continued. "They're out of this one!"

"Raptors!" Milesar shouted. "Break off! Break off! The Galactica is firing her missiles!"

The fighters scattered in all directions, turbos blazing, trying to get clear of the inevitable impact. Milesar looked back in horror as he realized that the Galactica, and all the souls aboard her, were about to die.

"Now!" Athena shouted, and she began firing missile after missile at the Cylon ship. Starbuck also release all of his missiles at the same micron that huge orange lances burst from the forward section of the Galactica. The first two of the Galactica's missiles impacted the Cylon Base ship, buckling its shields. A third struck, but the reinforced forward protection held.

Then the first of Athena and Starbuck's missiles began raking across the unprotected aft side. Explosions dotted the lower saucer and central column. The coronal blue wall of energy at the front of the ship fluctuated in and out once, and collapsed completely.

"We did it!" Athena shouted triumphantly.

Adama watched as the shields on the enemy ship died, just as two more of his missiles streaked out towards the enemy ship. The first one struck the upper saucer, shredding a third of it with devastating fury while the second on struck the central column. The great vessel suddenly broke apart as the resulting internal explosions ripped it apart.

"Two more!" Adama called out. "Fire!"

Two more missiles struck the remaining lower section and a large chunk of the upper saucer, breaking it up further.

"Impact in fifteen microns!" Someone called from the stations

below.

Adama took a deep breath and grasped the rail of the command platform.

"All hands brace for impact!" He shouted.

"The fireball of secondary explosions enveloped his ship and he was pitched forward over the rail. Sparks and flames erupted as bulkheads and consoles twisted and broke.

He landed hard on the lower deck, amidst a pile of other falling debris. He was dimly aware of pain in his side, and one of his legs, though he was so disoriented that he couldn't tell which one. Then blackness took him.

Athena, Starbuck, Apollo, Backis, and the rest of the Black Raptors watched in horror as the fireball surrounded and washed over the Galactica as the debris from the disintegrating Base Ship peppered it like molten rain.

Some averted their eyes while others cried out in dismay.

Athena and Starbuck peeled away from the expanding cloud of debris as they each blinked furiously to get the spots out of their eyes.

As they reached a safe distance, they turned around and looked again.

Against all hope, the shape of the Galactica drifted out of the fading fireball, its engines glowing with the fading heat of deactivation, and half of the alpha landing bay shredded and blown open. No lights, save the glow of raging fires within the ship, illuminated her hull, but she was intact!

"Great Stars of Kobol," Apollo whispered in fear and amazement. He tore his eyes from the sight and began opening as many com channels as he could find.

"Galactica, do you read?" He paused, listening for a micron to the static. "Galactica! This is Blue - Raptor Thirteen! Do you read!"

Silenceâ€¦

END

Now, don't get mad at me! I realize these cliffhanger endings can be infuriating at times, but look at the bright side. You know that there will be another "episode."

Thanks for reading, and see you in a couple of sections (sorry, months) with the next installment!

Mike

End
file.